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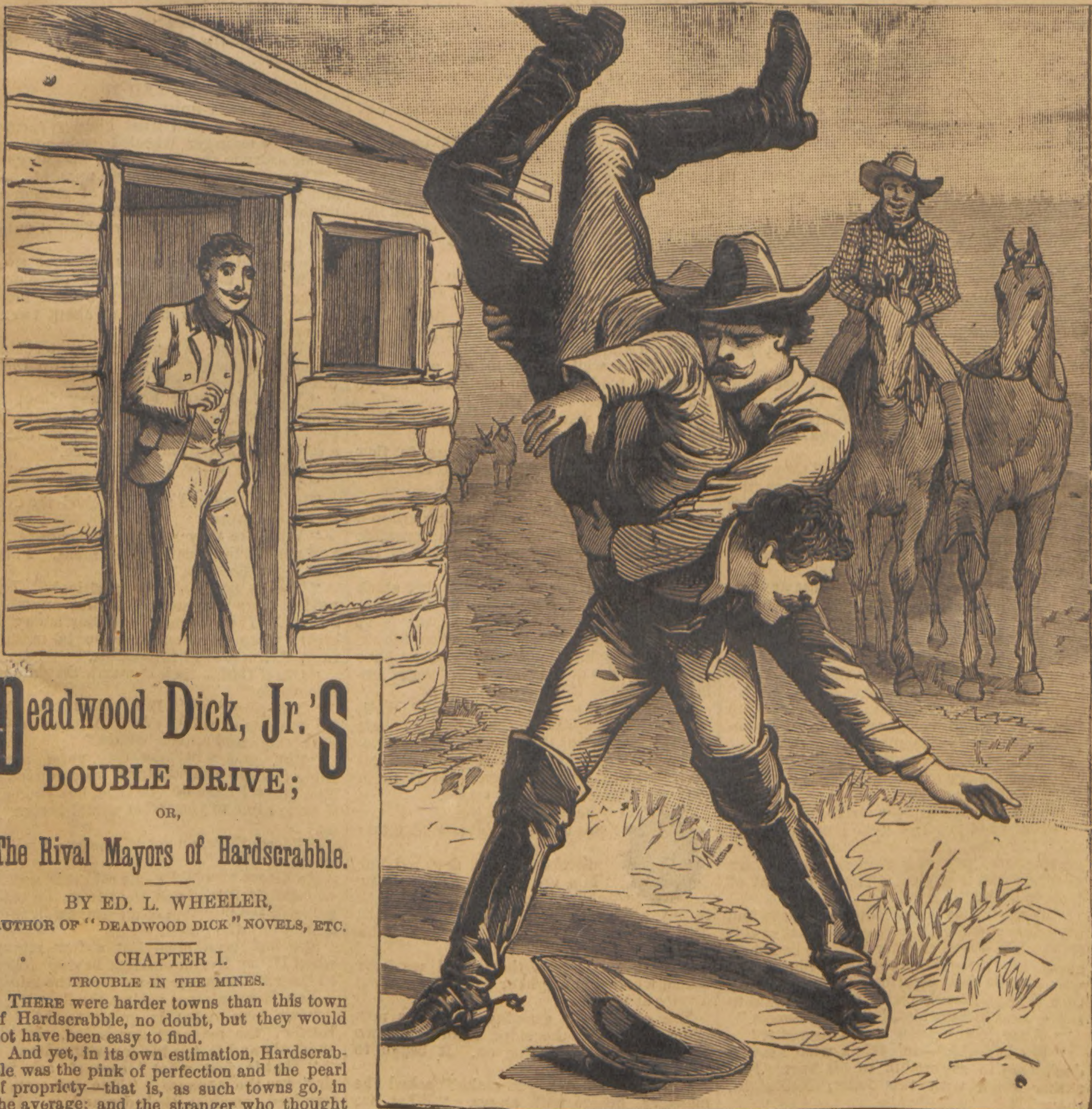
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Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s DOUBLE DRIVE;

OR,

The Rival Mayors of Hardscrabble.

BY ED. L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE IN THE MINES.

THERE were harder towns than this town of Hardscrabble, no doubt, but they would not have been easy to find.

And yet, in its own estimation, Hardscrabble was the pink of perfection and the pearl of propriety—that is, as such towns go, in the average; and the stranger who thought otherwise did well to keep his thoughts to himself.

THE HORSE-TRADER WAS WHIRLING THE MAYOR OF HARDSCRABBLE AROUND IN HIS ARMS IN A MANNER CALCULATED TO MAKE HIS HEAD SWIM.

H. W. PRAY,
Norwood, R. I.

It was not a big burg, but it was big enough to take care of itself and run its own affairs, as the rough denizens were wont to declare. It had been the outcome of a rich find, springing suddenly into being about three years before the time of our romance.

The chief citizen of the place was one David Van Bascomb, who was at the head of the Marguerite Mining Company.

Van Bascomb was a solid man in every sense of the word. He was of big stature and considerable avoirdupois, and was solid in the financial sense as well as otherwise.

He was a heavy stockholder in the Marguerite, and was said to have business interests elsewhere besides. Whether this was so or not, it was enough to own a good slice of the Marguerite, for this was one of the richest mines in that district.

This magnate was seated in his office one morning, smoking his after-breakfast cigar, when a rough citizen entered.

"Good-morning, mayor!" the mine-president greeted.

"Same to you," was the gruff response, with a wave of the hand. "Hope et'll be a good 'un, anyhow."

"What do you mean, Zeke?" Van Bascomb inquired.

"Well, I sort o' feel that thar's trouble a-brewin' hyer, that's ther long an' short of et, Dave Van Bascomb."

"Trouble brewing?"

"That's what I said."

"Where do you see indications of it?"

"Cast yer eye down thar towards the Marguerite, an' mebbly you'll see."

The mine-president and general manager—for such he was, looked as directed and exclaimed:

"Why, the men haven't gone to work!"

"That's about ther size of et, I kalkylate."

"What does it mean?"

"Give it up. What's ther meanin' of anything, sence that fellow McKnight got his grip onto this hyer town?"

"Well, that's so; still, I don't see how that can have had anything to do with stopping work at the Marguerite. Come, we'll take a walk up there; maybe some accident has happened."

The manager put on his hat and they went out together, turning their steps in the direction of the mine, some distance up the gulch but in plain sight from the office, where a crowd was collected.

"Then McKnight has still got you on the hip, has he?" asked Van Bascomb.

"Well, he's got the upper hand at present, there's no use denying it," the other acknowledged.

"And he has got to be ousted, somehow," declared the mine-manager, with somewhat of emphasis. "I have been thinking about it, though I have said nothing to you lately."

"I'll tell you what I think's the matter up thar," suddenly asserted the manager's companion, changing the subject.

"Well, what do you think it is?"

"I think et's a strike."

"A strike!"

"That's what I said—a strike."

"But, good heavens, Zeke Hummingbird, what have they got to strike for? They are getting more pay now than any other mine in the district is paying. They'd be a lot of fools to strike."

"Wull, mebbly I'm wrong, but I have had my surspicions fer a day or two that everything ain't jest as et orter be. To be honest about et, Dave Van Bascomb, I don't go a whole lot on that superintendent you've got thar, though Lord knows I wouldn't want to say a word to hurt him, but that's honest."

"What do you know to his discredit?"

"Wull, nothin'—an' that's what I say; I don't want to say nothin' to his hurt. He's ruther thick with this feller, McKnight, though."

"And, as Jimmie McKnight ousted you out of your office as mayor, there is good

reason why you should dislike him, of course. If that is all you know to Henry Keefer's discredit, it amounts to little."

"That's so; that's so."

Nothing further was said, and they pushed on up the slope to the mill, before which the crowd was gathered.

The men looked half sheepish, half sullen, and their mutterings died away and they became silent as the mine-manager and his companion drew near.

"Well, boys, what's the matter?" asked Van Bascomb.

A young man pushed his way to the front immediately, and answered:

"The matter is the men have struck for higher pay, Mr. Van Bascomb," with a show of indignation.

"Struck for higher pay?" the mine-manager repeated. "Why, boys, what are you thinking about? You are getting ten cents more than any other mine in the district is paying, as it is."

"What's ten cents?" one fellow sneered.

"It is a good deal, when it comes to the end of the month, my men, seeing that there are close upon ninety of you," was the sharp rejoinder. "Get back to your work, now, every man of you, and be glad you've got it to do!"

"Hear how he talks!" muttered another of the crowd.

"And ther Marguerite a-rollin' up thousands fer him and the rest of ther stockholders every month!"

"An' we want a share of et, you bet!" chimed in yet another, even more boldly. "Et's our bone an' muscle what gits et out of ther ground, an' we orter have somethin' to show fer our toil."

"Don't you get your wages?" demanded the irate manager.

"Wull, yes, but—"

"And don't we pay more than any other mine you know of?"

"Yer kin well afford to pay more," asserted the boldest of the strikers, "an' ye kin afford to pay more still."

"You bet!" was the scattering fire from the throng.

"What we want is a fair share in ther profits," one man shouted from the rear, where he could not be singled out.

"You do, eh?" grated the manager, growing pale—proof that he was getting aroused to white anger. "You do, eh?" he repeated. "How long have you been owners of the concern, let me ask?"

"We worked out a share in ther stock long ago. Thar ain't a foot of ther bare walls along ther vein down thar that ain't been sprinkled wi' ther sweat of our brows, an' we have made up our minds that we have got some claim onto ther mine an' we ar' goin' to see about it."

"That's the way you look at it, eh? Well, you have not spent an hour in that shaft or anywhere about the mine that you haven't been well paid for, and if you have left drops of sweat here and there, that is proof that you have earned your wages."

"Hear how he talks, wull ye!"

"As if we was dogs, or slaves under ther lash!"

"You are mistaken, men," declared Van Bascomb. "You are looking at this thing in a wrong light. Your leader, whoever he is, has drilled crooked ideas into your heads. You have no just cause for this action this morning."

"Wull, this hyer's ther stand we have taken, whether et's right or wrong," sung out a voice at the rear.

The crowd was growing larger, as men came running up the slope from the town to learn what was going on. It began to look serious.

"What demand do you make?" asked the manager, hoarse with anger. "What are you striking for, anyhow?"

"They have given me to understand,

sir," spoke up the young man before mentioned—who, by the way, was Keefer, the superintendent—"that they want a dollar a day more all around, every man of them."

The manager fairly turned purple with rage.

"What are you thinking about?" he roared, when he could speak at all. "You don't know what you are asking! Have you got the idea into your heads that it requires skilled labor—skilled mechanics and artisans—to handle the pick and shovel? There is no reason in what you ask!"

"Wull, that's what we do ask, an' that's what we mean to have."

"Come to the office and get your pay, every mother's son of you! We can put Italians or Hungarians in your places at half the pay you are getting!"

"Oh, no; et won't work that way, boss," spoke up one of the ringleaders. "Ef we don't git what we ask we won't work, an' we ar' goin' to see that nobody takes our places, too, you bet!"

Such was the stand taken, and the strike at the Marguerite appeared to be on with a vengeance.

CHAPTER II.

A MANY-HORNED DILEMMA.

As if not daring to trust himself further, the mine-manager wheeled suddenly and strode away in the direction of his office.

There was a troubled look upon his face, and yet withal an expression of grim determination. He knew he was in the right, and he had made the resolve to fight it out on that line.

He walked with a quick, nervous stride and in a few minutes was at the office door.

There stood a young lady, awaiting him—a pretty girl, rather dark, and about twenty years of age.

"Why, papa, what is the matter?" she asked, anxiously. "I was going up there but saw you coming."

"You had better keep away from the crowd, Clara, my child," was the gentle reply. "The men have seen fit to go out on a strike, and there may be trouble."

"Out on a strike, you say?"

"Yes."

The manager had now unlocked the door, and they entered.

"What are they striking for, papa? Are you not dealing justly with them? I hope that is not the case."

"That is not the case, positively. I am paying more than any other mine anywhere around. They demand a dollar a day increase when common sense ought to show them that would be impossible."

"Oh, if that is their demand, they are unreasonable!"

"Yes, positively. But, this is no place for you this morning, dear. You go back to the cottage and remain within."

"But, you will take care, papa, not to anger the men and lead them to do you harm? You know I have no one here but you, and if harm came to you, what would become of me?"

"There, there, do not be uneasy; I will be all right, Clara."

He kissed his child, as he said this, and the young lady turned and went from the office, going in the direction of a cottage a little distance down the gulch.

She had been gone but a few minutes when Henry Keefer entered, having followed the mine-manager down from the mines.

Van Bascomb was pacing the floor.

"See here, what is going to be done, Keefer?" the manager demanded, stopping suddenly and facing his superintendent.

"That is just what I came to ask you, sir," was the response. "The men seem determined, crazy as their demand is. Don't you think it would be well to call in the mayor for consultation?"

"Which one?"

"Why, McKnight, of course; he is the one in power."

"And old Zeke Hummingbird is the mayor by right. Things are in a mighty bad situation here."

Just a word in explanation.

Zeke Hummingbird, a rough but solid citizen of the camp, had been elected to the office of mayor for a term of three years. He had not served quite two years of his term when a certain class of citizens began to find fault with his administration, and they called a public meeting, declaring the office vacant, and elected one Jim McKnight to fill it.

This fellow, McKnight, was a sport, comparatively a new-comer in the camp, but one who had made friends and had a large following. Men had been coming and going, constantly, and as a natural result, Zeke Hummingbird's supporters had thinned out, while a new class of men were taking their places. The solid men of the camp were still in favor of the old mayor, and in sympathy with him, but as they were now by far in the minority, they could do nothing.

McKnight had all the bad element of the town behind him.

"Yes, he may be mayor by right," rejoined Keefer, "but he isn't mayor in fact, and he can do nothing for us in this emergency. McKnight is the man who has got the people at his back."

"And the worst half of them by long odds. A good many of his supporters are our miners, you are aware, and what could he do with them? All the solid men of this camp and fully two thirds of the property holders are in sympathy with Zeke. I tell you we are helpless."

"But, that isn't saying that McKnight wouldn't do the fair thing in this instance, Mr. Van Bascomb."

"Perhaps he would; I do not question that; but, the very men he would have to call to his support are, in part, the very ones who are striking. You see his hands are tied."

"No, not of necessity, sir; if you find him disposed to do the right thing, the Hummingbird men would rally to his support and—"

"And there is where you reach the critical point," the manager interrupted. "If our class went to his support his own following would desert him instantly and would oust him the same as they ousted Zeke Hummingbird."

This seemed to give Keefer a new view of the situation, for he scratched his head.

"And, you see," the manager continued, "he would not care to risk losing his office and his prestige, and just there the thing would hinge. But, ha! here he comes this minute."

Another man entered the office.

He was a young man, maybe thirty years of age, rather good-looking, with dark hair and mustache, and black eyes.

He was sportishly attired, was cool and easy in manner, and was smoking a freshly lighted cigar. There was about his face, or the expression of it, something that was not altogether pleasing.

"What's the matter, Van Bascomb?" he asked. "Men on a strike?"

"Yes, they are on a strike, and what they demand is altogether out of reason, too," and the manager explained.

"Well, that is putting it strong," McKnight averred. "You can't give it, of course."

"Out of the question."

"And if you don't, what then?"

"No telling. They intend to hold the mine, and will not allow any one else to fill their places. I told them all to come to the office and get their pay, but they will not do that."

"It is serious. I'll tell you what I would do."

"Well?"

"I would compromise the matter; that is

to say, give them a raise of half a dollar until you can see your way out of the woods. The Marguerite can afford it, and it will be money saved in the end, perhaps."

"Impossible, as you can readily see, McKnight. That would be to engender discontent in all the other mines, and the first we would know there would be the deuce to pay all around. Besides, they are already getting more than any other mine is paying its men."

"Well, it's none of my business, of course."

"It should be."

"Why?"

"You are mayor of the town."

"Oh, am I? You are one of the men who have insisted that Zeke Hummingbird is mayor. You seem to have changed your mind."

"Not a bit of it, sir. I still say that Zeke Hummingbird is the man justly entitled to the office you are usurping. But, you have usurped the place, you have the following, and you are the mayor in fact."

"Well, yes; I guess I am."

"And, as such, it is your business to take a hand in this trouble."

"I'm willing to do so, but, you see, many of the strikers are my own supporters, and I doubt if one half would fight against the other, if it came to that."

"We don't want any fighting. We don't want any trouble, if it can be avoided by fair means."

"Your head is level there, sir. They might take it into their heads to fire the property, and then there would be the mischief to pay. I think you had better concede something; it will be cheaper in the long run."

"It is bad, either way."

"Mighty bad," asserted Keefer.

"What I was going to say," McKnight continued, "I am going up there, and it is quite likely that the crowd will listen to anything I suggest. Now, if you will say you will confer with their leaders, I think that will make everything peaceful for a few hours at any rate."

"I'll do that," agreed the mine-manager, promptly. "Tell them to give me a little time to consider it, and I will meet their leaders here in the office at this same hour to-morrow morning. They ought to be willing to do that."

"Yes, sir, I think they will fall in with the plan."

CHAPTER III.

A PEEP BEHIND THE SCENES.

THE leading saloon at this camp of Hardscrabble bore the rather top-heavy cognomen of Cosmopolitan Hall.

There were saloons a-plenty, but the Cosmopolitan Hall was the resort of the town, the place where the "elephant" was on exhibition day and night, continuously.

It was, perhaps, the only resort that ran night and day, unless we except the leading hotel, the Hardscrabble Inn—so called, and there it was only the office that was kept open all night.

When McKnight left the office of the Marguerite he glanced across the street in the direction of the Cosmopolitan Hall.

The doors were wide open, and he could see inside.

At this hour of the day business was dull, in the saloon, and only a few persons were to be seen.

The excitement up at the Marguerite had about depopulated the camp proper, for the time being, and the main street was almost deserted. Nevertheless, McKnight saw the person for whom he looked—a woman.

She was sitting at one of the tables in the big room, opposite the doors and facing the street.

A woman of considerable claim to good looks, about twenty five years of age, and about her the air of a sport. Her dress, too, suggested this.

She saw McKnight as he looked in that direction and gave him a signal of recognition, a signal which he promptly answered, and each seemed to understand the other well enough. The woman leaned back in her chair and sipped her soda, while McKnight went on.

In a few minutes the mayor was at the mines.

"Well, boys, what's the matter here this morning?" he made inquiry.

He was given an understanding of the situation by one of the strikers, and he said:

"I think you are asking too much, boys. I have just seen Mr. Van Bascomb, and I think he will be willing to meet you half way in the matter of a compromise."

"Nary a compromise!" cried one.

"Not a cent!" another. "The hull hog or none!"

"You had better be reasonable," the mayor advised. "You cannot afford to be out of work, and the company cannot afford to have the mine stopped. Now, I'll tell you what the manager says."

"What's he say? He said too much when he was hyer."

"He asks that you give him a little time to consider the matter, and says he will meet your leaders at the office at this hour to-morrow morning. Now, if you take my advice you will go to work to-day, and keep on working, and let your leaders make terms with Van Bascomb."

"Ther time to strike is while ther iron is hot," one fellow intimated.

"That may be true, but, you must be willing to deal fairly if you expect the same kind of dealing. Van Bascomb is not a hard man, as you all know, and what he says goes. We don't want trouble here at Hardscrabble if we can help it, and the easiest way is the best way. So, go to work, every man of you; earn your day's wages and save the company from loss. You won't lose anything by it."

The men looked at one another, and Mayor Hummingbird, who was still there, looked at his rival as if he could not believe he had heard aright.

McKnight noticed it.

"Am I not right, Hummingbird?" he demanded.

"Thar's a solid chunk of hoss sense in what you have said, anyhow," the old man answered.

"What do ye say, boys?" asked the man who was perhaps the ringleader of the strikers, one Sam Claffinger by name. "Shall we do what Jimmie McKnight says, an' see how et will come out?"

There was silence for a moment, then one fellow responded.

"You ar' ther leader, Sam."

"Yes, but I'm only one of ye," was the rejoinder. "I'll put et to vote, an' see what yer feelin' is about et. Now, all that's in favor of doin' accordin' to what Mayor McKnight has said, let 'em say yes; all what's opposed, let 'em answer no. Which is et?"

The vote was prompt, and it was in the affirmative.

"That settles et," said Claffinger. "We'll take yer advice, mayor, an' we'll wait on ther boss to-morrow. But, ef he ain't willin' to do what's right, after we've done white by him, let him look out, that's all."

"Good for you, men!" cried the mayor. "I haven't a doubt but you'll come out all right, now. Go to your work and make up this lost hour before noon!"

"Three cheers fer ther mayor!" some fellow suggested.

The cheers were given with a hearty will, and the noise brought Van Bascomb and Keefer out of the office to see what was going on.

Finishing with a roaring tiger, the employees of the Marguerite hurried to their work in various places in and about the mine, and the rest of the crowd returned to the camp.

The name of Jimmie McKnight was on every lip, most favorably, and he was the hero of the hour.

He, however, bore it all modestly.

When the crowd reached the street and camp center, McKnight entered the Cosmopolitan Hall, while Zeke Hummingbird joined the mine manager and the superintendent in front of the Marguerite office.

Let us follow McKnight.

On entering the saloon he went straight to where the woman was sitting.

"This is rather early for Sparkler Sal to be up isn't it?" he remarked.

"Well, yes, you are right," was the answer, in a pleasing tone. "But I was eager to hear the result."

McKnight had taken a seat, and the last was said in lower voice.

"Everything is all right," he declared.

"It has worked as you planned?"

"So far."

"And what about Van Bascomb?"

"I think I have got him right where I want him, on the hip."

"And you believe he will give what the men demand?"

"Oh, no; that's not to be expected; but, he will compromise rather than have trouble, I feel certain."

"What was all the cheering about?"

"Cheering me."

"Ha! ha! ha! But it is all right, and so much the better."

"Yes, for it has doubled my grip here. Van Bascomb will have to admit that I have done what he could not have accomplished."

"And once he is made to realize that you really control the destinies of the Marguerite we can handle him about as we please, eh? It will do me good to pull that proud daughter of his down from her pedestal."

"And that is what will be done, if all works well."

"You bet!"

"When you are made Mrs. Van Bascomb and become her step-mother, you can turn her out, you know."

Sparkler Sal made an impatient gesture.

"I hate the thought of that part of the scheme, Jim, and wish there was some other way around it. It is almost as bad as the thought of your wedding that stuck-up thing."

"But, that is the way we are to get hold of the property, you know. You will marry a third, at least, and I will marry the balance, and then, when we have disposed of our incumbrances, we will lump the whole and be fixed for life. True love never has run smooth, you know."

"And this is where ours has come to a particularly rough place, it seems."

"No matter, Sal, play your part, and I will plan the game to the end and play my role, and all will come out well."

"Do you know, Jim, I am jealous of that girl?"

"Nonsense!"

"But, I am. What if you should really learn to love her, and leave me in the lurch—"

"Pshaw! get that out of your mind at once, little sport! I think more of your little finger than I do of her whole body, and I wouldn't give a snap to marry her if it wasn't to transfer her wealth to you, afterward."

"And don't you feel a bit jealous when you think of my marrying the old man?"

"Well, yes; but, it is a matter of business, and so I choke it down and say nothing. It won't be forever, you know. But, this is not a safe place for such talk, so let us drop it. We have got the ball to rolling, now, and as soon as it begins to run down hill it will crush everything in its path."

"I hope it will all come out right, anyhow. It won't be because I have not done my part if it don't, that's sure."

CHAPTER IV.

A BUSINESS PROPOSITION.

ZEKE HUMMINGBIRD had joined Van Bascomb and Keefer in front of the mine office, as stated, at the same time that McKnight went into the Cosmopolitan Hall.

"What has happened, Zeke?" the mine-manager hurriedly asked.

"The men have happened ter go back to work, that's what," was the very unsatisfying answer.

"Yes, yes; we guessed that much; but, on what terms did they go back? That is to say, what induced them to return to work?"

"Mayor McKnight done et."

This was the first time Zeke had yielded the point. Never before, since the trouble began between himself and McKnight, had he acknowledged McKnight as mayor of the town.

The mine-manager looked at him in surprise.

"Mayor McKnight?" he repeated.

"That was what I said."

"Then you yield your claim to him?"

"Yes; he may as well have ther name, seein' that he's got ther game."

"Come in and tell us all about it."

Van Bascomb entered the office, followed by the superintendent, and Hummingbird and some others went in.

Hummingbird then related what had taken place at the mine, his story being confirmed by the others, who had seen and heard.

"You don't mean to tell me McKnight took that action, do you?" the mine-manager demanded.

He was assured of it.

"Never heard a man talk fairer an' squarer in my life," declared the old mayor of the town. "And that's jest how ther matter stands. They have gone to work, and tomorrow mornin' Claffinger and some others will wait on ye here to see what you'll do, an' that will be ther critical pint of ther hull business."

"Have you any idea what compromise they will agree to?"

"I haven't. I reckon it'll be a offer to split ther difference with yer, fer a guess."

"And I can't do that; it will be just as impossible to pay the half as the whole. Still they are disposed to act square with me, I can't deny that."

"An' you have to thank Mayor McKnight fer et all."

"Well, I'll have to think over it. Go back to the men, Keefer, and carry on the work as if nothing had happened, and we'll see what is going to be done. Leave me alone, men, please."

All went out, and Van Bascomb was left to wrestle with the problem alone.

"Confound it, what does it mean?" he asked himself. "A strike was the last thing I looked for here, for we have been paying our men well and treating them like men besides. There is something back of this—a nigger in the fence, somewhere. I wish that man Bristol would put in his appearance."

While he was pacing the floor McKnight entered.

"Well, you see what I have been able to do for you," he reminded, the first thing.

"Yes, and I'm much obliged to you for it, too. But what in the world is to be the outcome? You must know how impossible it will be for me to pay what they ask, or anywhere near it."

"To-morrow morning must decide."

"And if I refuse—"

"There will be trouble, and no telling where it will stop. They will feel as if they have done their part."

"Well, you have helped me so far; now, what do you advise?"

"That depends."

McKnight had taken a seat, laid off his hat, and had lighted a cigar at which he puffed with great relish.

"Depends on what?"

"How badly you want my help."

"Depends on how bad I want your help?"

"Exactly."

"Well, just explain yourself, please."

"And you will need help pretty decidedly bad, I take it, eh?"

"I am not so sure about that. I can fight, if it comes to that, and they will find it out so."

"And lose more in a week than you have made in the past two years. That will not do at all, Mr. Van Bascomb. I can bring you out of this with comparatively little loss."

"What do you recommend, then?"

"Now you are back again to the starting point. I said that depends."

"Well, explain."

"I can do so in a few words. You know that I love your daughter, sir, and if you will favor my suit I'll pledge you my word that this matter won't amount to much."

Van Bascomb was turning purple, almost, and seemed to be choking.

"Wh—what!" he cried. "Sell my child to you for a price?"

"You look at it in the wrong light, my dear sir, for I am only playing to win because I love—madly and devotedly love."

"But, you are not the kind of a man I would select to be the husband of my daughter, sir, and what assurance have you that she cares anything for you? This can never be, McKnight."

"It has got to be."

"What! you would force me?"

"No, no; I mean it has got to be or life is worth nothing to me."

"You have not answered my question, sir. What reason have you to think she cares for you?"

"No reason whatever, sir. It is I who care for her. I am acting the honorable part in coming to you first. Still, I have no reason to think she dislikes me."

McKnight had closed the door on entering.

It was now thrown open, and a vision of sunlight, almost, sprung in.

Clara Van Bascomb was the vision, her face beaming with smiles, and with a nod to her father she gave her hand to McKnight.

"I have heard all about it, Mr. McKnight," she said, "and I want to thank you for it all. You have helped papa more than any one else could have helped him, I am sure."

"It is not worth mentioning, Miss Van Bascomb," was the response, and the man lifted her hand to his lips and boldly kissed her fingers. "Or, if it was, this has amply repaid the service," he added.

Her face flushed, and she turned immediately to her father.

"I am so glad, papa, that it has been so easily settled; for, of course, you can easily come to a compromise of some sort when the committee wait upon you."

"It will be the easiest thing in the world," hastened McKnight. "With my aid, he can bring about almost any kind of a settlement he desires, now that the men are in the mood for it."

He opened the door to take leave.

"And of course you will lend your aid," said the young lady, full of confidence. "You are the only man who can be of any use to papa in this emergency. And, as you are mayor of the town, it is plainly your duty— But, pardon me for speaking about that."

"Certainly, I stand ready to do my whole duty, and will do everything in my power to bring affairs around all straight—if he will allow me to do so."

He bowed and was gone.

Clara looked to her father for an explanation.

"If you will allow him to do so?" she asked. "Of course you will allow it; what can he mean?"

There was a cloud on Van Bascomb's face, and he paced the floor with his hands clinched behind his back. The young girl's face was the picture of wonderment undisguised.

"His meaning is deep, my child," he said. "It must be, indeed."

"What do you think of the man, Clara?"

"Why, I hardly know, papa; he seems to be better than I thought him to be."

"With an object in it all. Yes, he has done me a service, and stands ready to do me another, provided—"

"Provided what?"

"That I will give my consent for him to seek your hand in marriage, Clara. That is the long, the short and the whole of it. What have you to say to his proposition, my child?"

The young woman's face had grown deathly pale, and she had grasped the back of a chair for support.

"Is it your desire that I should marry him, papa?" she faintly asked.

"Answer my question first, Clara."

CHAPTER V.

SETTLING A QUESTION.

FOR a moment the young woman was silent, her eyes cast down.

Then she raised her head, looked her father squarely in the face, and gave him her answer:

"Papa, I had rather die than become the wife of such a man. I could never marry James McKnight willingly. I hope such is not your desire."

"Spoken like my own fearless Clara!" Mr. Van Bascomb exclaimed. "Have no fear, my child, for I have no desire that you should marry him. I only wanted to know how you stand."

"Well, you know."

"Yes."

"And what will be the result?"

"That matters not, my child. We'll meet the trouble when it comes."

"But, papa, isn't there a chance to use this rascal to our advantage? I call him so, because only a rascal could make such a proposal."

"In what way, Clara?"

"You say all he asks is your consent to seek my hand."

"He wants me to favor his suit."

"That is about all, you could do anyhow, papa, as we both know very well. You concede that much and leave the rest to me."

"What a schemer you are, my child! I think I had better take you out of this wild place, for you seem to be learning too much. Or is it only the outcropping of the native craftiness in your sex?"

"Call it the latter, then you will not send me away from you, papa."

"And there's still more of it! But, dare you trust yourself that far, if I grant what you ask?"

"Do I look as if I should run away in fright? You do your part, papa, and I will take care of the rest of the matter. But, make use of him at the same time, you know."

"Certainly I'll do that."

"He says he can bring about a settlement in any manner you desire, now that the men are in mood for it; make use of him to the full limit."

So the little counterplot was laid, and finally Clara Van Bascomb went back to the cottage, meeting McKnight on the way and giving him a friendly smile that quite encouraged that gentleman.

During the day there was a new arrival in town.

The new-comer was a rather good-looking

stranger, but one clad in about the roughest manner.

He had a companion, an odd-looking fellow some years older than himself who had the appearance of being an Indian-Mexican half-breed.

The first mentioned wore a big slouch hat, coarse jacket and trousers, blue shirt and big top-boots with spurs fixed upon the heels. A pistol swung in a holster at his hip.

The other wore a similar big hat, a plaid shirt, and trousers and boots of the very coarsest. His weapons were in a belt.

They came mounted, and had something like a dozen horses in lead.

"I'll be hanged if they don't look like hoss-thieves," declared Tony Young, as he first sighted them from the office of Mayor McKnight.

Tony Young, by the way, was the mayor's clerk and handy man. He was a young fellow, about twenty years of age, and one who was something of a Smart Aleck in his way.

"Yer hadn't better let 'em hear ye say et," suggested one Hud Taylor, who happened to stand near.

"I wouldn't wonder if the boy is more than half right, just the same," spoke up Mayor McKnight himself. "They look like hard customers, the pair of them."

"But all ther same et moughtn't be easy ter prove," Taylor rejoined.

"No, perhaps not."

This, as said, when the new-comers first made their appearance.

The mayor and the others stepped out of the office as they came along, and the new-comers drew rein.

"Good afternoon!" greeted the one first described. "What is the name of this likely-lookin' burg, gentlemen?"

"This is Hardscrabble," answered the mayor. "Who and what are you?"

"I'm a dealer in horseflesh; ready to buy, sell, exchange, trade, dicker, or swap, and I'll cheat every time if I can."

"What's your name?"

"Horse Strader. What's yours?"

"Horse Trader—what kind of a name is that? When I asked for your name I expected to get it."

"Same here. I asked for yours."

"Well, mine is McKnight, and I'm mayor of this town. Now, then, sir, give me your name, and no more fooling about it."

McKnight was a little irritated.

"I gave you my name in the first place, sir," the new-comer declared. "That is the name I am known by—Horse Strader."

"That is no name at all—Horse Trader; that is the business you follow, it appears, but you can't wring that in for a name, not here at any rate. Come, now, show down your real cognomen, sir."

"Well, the first part of it is a nickname, I'll admit; my name is Dick Strader, but they call me 'Horse' for short!"

"Oh! that makes a difference. Where do you hail from?"

"Texas, originally; more recently from New Mex."

"From the Lone Star, eh? That's a great country for horse-thieves I have heard."

"Well, Mr. Mayor, as we are not looking for fight, I will not take you up on the insinuation you would fling at us. I'll simply say that we don't belong to that class."

"We can't swear to it."

"True enough, you couldn't; neither could you prove anything against us if you tried. Enough said."

"On the other hand, can you prove to our satisfaction that you are straight? Do you carry bill of sale for all these horses you have brought with you? This is a matter of business."

"Yes, I see; you are inclined to make that your business which is none of your business, sir. These animals are all mine, most

of them got in the way of trading. Am I not right, Mongrel Mike?" he demanded, appealing to his companion to bear witness to the truth of his statement.

"That's straight," the well-named half-breed declared.

"What proof is that?" sneered McKnight. "We don't know either of you."

"You'll probably get better acquainted before we leave your town," Horse Strader intimated.

"I haven't said you might stop here," growled McKnight.

"And I haven't asked your permission, sir. You seem inclined to pick up a quarrel if you can."

"It couldn't amount to anything if I did. If you were out of that saddle I have conceit enough to believe that I could stand you on your head in about one minute, if it came to that."

"Yes, you look like a conceited cuss, that's so," and Mr. Strader handed his rein to his companion and slipped to the ground. "Maybe I can take some of it out of you. This is not in my line, exactly, but you are rubbing it on a little thicker than good nature can stand."

"I am, eh?"

"Yes, you are! We came here in peace, and we have come to stay for awhile, likewise in peace, if we can."

"Well, you can't stop here, so you had better go your way in the same manner. We want no horse-traders here, with a drove of cayuses of uncertain ownership. Get into your saddle and be off."

McKnight's hand was moving toward his hip.

"Hold on! Never mind drawing a gun; we can get along without that," urged the new-comer, waving his hand. "You said something about standing me on my head, and now I'll tell you what I'll do: We'll have a friendly wrestle—since you have put it into my mind, and the best man wins. If you throw me, I go; if I throw you, then I stay."

The Mayor of Hardscrabble had "put his foot in it," so to say, and he could not well get out of it.

"All right," he promptly acquiesced; "we'll have it that way. I'll send you riding up the gulch in just about two minutes by the watch. Are you ready?"

"All ready!"

They clinched, and in about a second of time the horse-trader was whirling the Mayor of Hardscrabble around in his arms in a manner calculated to make his head swim.

Two or three turns of this sort, in which he displayed the prowess of a Hercules, almost; then he deposited the mayor squarely upon his head on the ground, to the delight of Mongrel Mike, the amazement of Tony Young, and the complete astonishment of the crowd that had collected!

CHAPTER VI.

MCKNIGHT'S TOOL REPORTS.

"WULL, I ber darn!" exclaimed Hud Taylor, who was standing with the crowd a few yards off. "Stranger, you ar' a horse fer fair, you be!"

And the crowd echoed the sentiment.

The mayor was upon his feet in a second, and putting out his hand, he cried:

"Stranger, put it ther! You did that thing in the neatest kind of way, and I am not the man to squeal. That pays your footing at Hardscrabble, and you can stay here as long as you like."

Mr. Horse Strader took the proffered hand in a hearty grasp, and responded:

"That sounds as if you are a man of the right sort, mayor. I'm glad to have your permission to stay, though I intended to remain for a time anyhow—that is to say, unless you had dumped me in our brief contest,

in which case I would have turned tail and departed, according to agreement."

The crowd broke out in a cheer, for both the mayor and the new-comer.

"We won't discuss the matter of how you could have remained without my permission, now that you have it," rejoined McKnight. "You might have found it a little difficult. You are a tall man in a wrestle, I have to acknowledge. We'll have no further trouble, though, for I am a square man, and my word here is law; just ask the boys around, if you doubt it."

"I'll take your word for it," assured Strader.

"And that's my bond, every time."

"Well, where is your nearest feed-trough—that is to say your hotel?" was inquired.

"The Hardscrabble Inn, just ahead there, is the place you are looking for," answered McKnight. "I'm going that way."

The mayor had brushed the dirt from his clothes, now, and Strader, telling his man to come on, walked in the direction of the hotel in company with McKnight.

"You are just the kind of a man I like to meet," McKnight declared.

"A horse-thief, eh?"

"Ha! ha! That is past, now; so say no more about it. No, I mean a man of nerve and muscle."

"Well, I'm said to have a little of both!"

"A little! You are loaded full to the muzzle. I'm inclined to be your friend, rather than foe."

"I guess I can meet you half-way in that, if you are as square as you claim to be. Though I'm a dealer in horses, yet I can't put up long with anything that is crooked."

"You won't have to, in me."

"Good enough; I thought I'd merely mention it."

"That's all right, of course. I wouldn't wonder if you had struck a pretty good camp for your business."

"That so?"

"Yes. But things are a little unsettled just at present, owing to trouble in the mines," and the mayor gave a brief outline of that.

"That must give you some anxiety, seeing you are mayor," Strader suggested.

"Well, yes, it does. But, I have most of the men of the camp at my call; and that is everything. We'll try to protect your property, if trouble comes."

"And of course you look for my support, if needed."

"Well, yes."

They were now at the hotel.

Entering, the horse-trader made his terms with the landlord, and registered, and his stock of horses were taken around to the stables, under the keeping of Mongrel Mike, the half-breed.

The tilt between the mayor and the new-comer was soon newsed around, and Mr. Strader was an object of curiosity.

The man who could dump Jimmy McKnight must be a fellow extraordinary.

A good many of the denizens of the camp came prowling around the hotel for no other purpose than to get a look at him.

When McKnight finally went back to his office, Tony Young exclaimed:

"What the mischief is that man made of, boss?"

"Spring steel and India rubber, I imagine," was the sullen answer. "Never had a lift like that in my life."

"But, you'll square the account with him, I take it?"

"You can bet your life on it!" growled McKnight, his face dark with anger. "Don't say a word, though, for I am pretending to be his friend and have shut his eyes in that."

"I'm mum."

"When the time comes, then I'll open them again."

"I guess none of the boys will want to

tackle him, not even the bruisers around the camp."

"Probably not; but, I'll tackle him again before I'm done with him. Not at once, though, for I may want to use him first. I'm anxious to see what the strike will amount to."

"I guess it won't amount to much."

"Why not?"

"Because, I think you can make it go any way you want it to."

"What do you know about that? Don't be so free with your guesses, and don't you dare to get that idea noised around."

"Oh, that's all right, boss; I understand a thing or two. I'm as mum as a mule, and you needn't be uneasy about me. It all depends on how Van Bascomb takes your proposition."

"What do you know about that?"

"Just a little."

"And that is just a little more than I want you to repeat. But, you know me, Tony Young, and that it will not be well for you to anger me against yourself."

"Haven't the slightest intention of doing that, boss. But, I think it will be all right, and that the old man will come to your terms. I have got eyes, and can see as far into a board as the next man."

"Explain."

"Well, you know Henry Keefer has been paying some attention in that direction, don't you?"

"Certainly I know it, curse him!"

"You seem to be the best of friends with him; what do you want to curse him for?"

"None of your business. Say on."

"What I'm going to say will show you there is no need to curse him. He is out of the race, I take it."

"Ha! this grows interesting. What do you know?"

"I saw him meet Clara, this noon hour, and he tried to talk with her, but she gave him the cool go-by and you never saw a fellow look so cut up and surprised in all your born days."

"You don't tell me!"

"Well, that's what I have tried to tell you, anyhow."

"Yes, but it is past believing, almost. Well, keep your eye skinned, Tony, and let me know whatever you can find out."

The door opened and the manager of the Marguerite walked in.

"What's this I hear about you, McKnight?" he demanded, laughing. "They tell me you ran up against a snag a while ago."

"Ha! ha! Yes, you have got it straight; so I did. The best men are bound to get taken in once in a while, Mr. Van Bascomb, and this was my turn. That fellow is a giant for strength."

"Don't know who or what he is, eh?"

"No more than he lets out; his cognomen is Horse Strader, and it is certain he is a trader in horses. His true name is Dick Strader, he says."

"Dick, eh? Dick Strader? Never heard of him."

"That's his say-so."

"Well, no matter, McKnight. I have dropped in to see you for a few moments in private."

"All right, Tony, go and take a walk for your health, and be back in half an hour."

"All right, sir," respectfully, and the young fellow grabbed his hat and was gone forthwith.

"Now, then, Mr. McKnight, I am here on business," said the mine-manager. "I have thought over your proposition."

"Well, what is your decision?"

"I have decided to grant your request, conditionally: You help me to overcome this strike, and I will then give my consent to your trying to win my daughter's hand, and will speak to her about it."

"Mr. Van Bascomb, I am glad you have looked at it in the right light," cried the rascal, grabbing the manager's hand and shaking it warmly. "Nothing would have given me more pain than to have worked against you in even the slightest degree. Now our interests are one, and we are bound to succeed."

CHAPTER VII.

A SCENE IN THE SALOON.

NIGHT settled down, and the Cosmopolitan was a blaze of light.

If there is any place in the world where night is not known, it is your bonanza mining-camp.

As was sung of Creede—to change just a word:

"It is day all day in the daytime,
And there is no night indeed."

And so it was in the town of Hardscrabble. It was alive all day, and when night came on it was then that it really began to wake up.

The Cosmopolitan, as has been said, never closed its doors, and it had four relays of managers and three sets of bartenders, the best of whom were on duty when business was greatest.

Such places have been so many times described that it seems superfluous to describe this particular one, but, it is made a necessity in a measure, by the nature of this story.

The room was a large one, with posts all the way through the center that supported the roof.

The bars were long and roomy; there was a large space for dancing, and further back were numerous tables and chairs, with an apology for a stage in the rear end.

Lamps were numerous, and the place, as said, was a blaze of light. There was music, the hall having a piano back near the stage at which a man in his shirt sleeves sat and pounded out the popular airs of the day with seemingly untiring vigor. Games were going on upon every side.

To one of these in particular attention is invited.

It was the game of the Hall, and was presided over by no less a personage than Sparkler Sal.

She was in her place now, and a sight of her explained her peculiar name, for she was all asparkle with diamonds in every place where they could be properly worn.

Clad in a low-necked dress with short sleeves, and that of the finest silk of a color that became her well, and with her face flushed with the excitement of the hour, she attracted attention.

"Make your play, gentlemen!" she called out.

Her voice was rich and sweet, and it was hard to resist her invitation.

On her right sat David Van Bascomb, the mine president; opposite him was Mayor McKnight, and other leading citizens were around the board.

One seat had just been vacated.

"I reckon I'll take a back at this thing myself," said a man who had been looking on for some minutes.

It was Horse Strader, the horse-dealer.

He sat down as he spoke, and producing a wad of bills made a goodly purchase of chips to begin with.

Apparently he paid no attention to any one else, but played to suit himself, and usually such plays as a regular devotee would have avoided. And yet he seemed to win.

On the other hand, Van Bascomb was losing steadily.

"Make your play, gentlemen!"

"I'm going to follow your lead, just for luck, sir," the mine-manager now spoke up, addressing the new-comer.

"Just as you please about that, sir," was the off-hand response.

"You don't mind?"

"Not a bit."

So, Van Bascomb placed his chips on the same card with those of the stranger, and won.

"Hal! you are a mascot, sir," he cried.

"I'll try that again."

He did so, and lost!

The next time he won, but the next turn after he lost again, and continued to lose.

Suddenly something happened that was a surprise to everybody.

The stranger reached forth his arm, with a five-shooter in his fist, and covering Sparkler Sal, cried:

"Hands off! Don't you touch that box!"

Sparkler Sal's face paled instantly, and she looked at him with frightened eyes.

"Why, sir, what is the matter?" she asked.

"Sure enough, what is the matter?" supported McKnight. "I hope you don't imagine there is crooked work here."

"Not at all, sir," the cool response. "I don't imagine it, for I know it. Hands off that box, for I will bore the first man or woman that touches it."

"What do you mean to do?" asked the fair dealer.

"I mean to have you produce that slipped card, that is all. Produce it and show it up, please."

"A slipped card! Why, do you accuse me of cheating?"

"Nothing less, madam."

She was now pale to the lips, and glanced at McKnight as if appealing to him to help her out of the dilemma.

"This is infamous!" that worthy thundered. "Mr. Van Bascomb, I appeal to you, for you have done a good deal of playing at Sparkler Sal's table—"

"And a good deal of losing, I venture to say, too," broke in the stranger.

"You are right, there, sir," assured the manager.

"All the same I appeal to you," cried McKnight, "or to any other fair-minded man in the house. Don't we know that Sparkler Sal runs a square game?"

"Yes!"

"Yes! Yes!"

"You bet! She's all right!"

Such cries from every quarter in the hall.

"And I defy you to prove that I have done any cheating," now declared the dealer, speaking more coolly.

At that instant strong arms seized upon the new-comer from behind; his arm was jerked up, the pistol going off and the ball making a hole in the roof, while he was rudely jerked away from the table.

A quiet signal to assistants had accomplished this!

And in the momentary glance that every eye made in another direction, Sparkler Sal's fingers deftly removed a card.

Taken entirely unexpectedly, Strader had no chance against those who had held upon him, but the instant he got upon his feet he shook them off like rats.

There were two of them, both strong fellows, but one was sent spinning back against the wall, while a jerk by the collar hurled the other headlong under a table.

Horse Strader had a brace of guns in hand instantly.

"Hands off!" he ordered. "Somebody will get hurt if that trick is tried on again."

"It is against the rule of this hall, sir, to have weapons drawn here," announced the manager of the place, now coming forward.

"Rules or no rules, I draw weapons whenever they are needed for self-defense," returned the new-comer. "Your lackeys had no business to leap upon me as they did."

"And you had no reason for drawing a gun upon this lady."

"That's where we differ in opinion, sir. She cheated, and I meant to show it up to the house."

"Impossible to believe, sir. Sparkler Sal, what have you to say?"

"Let him prove it, if he can."

"It is too late, now," said Strader. "The card has been removed, and I have lost the proof."

"That's one way to worm out of it," sneered a man in the crowd.

"It will never happen again when I am playing, be sure of that," retorted the man of horses. "If it does, and I see it, something will drop."

"You will never play again at my table, sir," declared Sparkler Sal, with a fine showing of indignation. "Unless you give up your chair I will close the game for the evening."

"Rather than force you to do that, I will yield, of course," and the stranger gathered up his chips, had them cashed, and withdrew from that part of the room, every eye following him for a few moments.

This was only a passing incident for a place like the Cosmopolitan, and the crowd immediately forgot all about it; but, not so the chief actors in the little dramatic episode.

From that time on, while he remained at the table, Van Bascomb's losings and winnings were about even.

Finally he rose and took his leave, and as he did so Sparkler Sal said:

"Have you a suspicion that I have cheated you, sir?"

"Not the slightest," the answer.

"Because, if you have, I will pay back every dollar I have ever won from you, if you can tell me the amount. I want it understood that Sparkler Sal runs a fair and square game."

"That's all right," assumed the mine-owner; "don't mention it."

CHAPTER VIII.

SOMEWHAT OF A SURPRISE.

WHILE speaking, the gambler queen had looked into the mine-manager's eyes in rather a fond way.

Her own full, peerless eyes seemed to be swimming in tears all ready to spring forth, and the hard head of the mine-manager swam, too, as he looked into them.

Van Bascomb could not deny the fact, to himself, that he was considerably under the spell of this good-looking woman.

She had cast an influence over him which he could not fight off.

Still, he had not tried to resist it, for he had no objection to a little flirtation with the Sparkler.

And, he had found that she had no objection to meeting him half-way, or even more; and, as he left the saloon, he felt a regret that such a charge had been made against her.

"It's too bad," he said to himself, "that it happened. I don't believe she cheats; at any rate not me, for any one with half an eye can see that she is dead stuck on me. That fellow must have been mistaken, and I'm glad he got taken down for his freshness."

He went in the direction of his cottage.

"No, Sparkler Sal is all right," he said further. "Her offer to give me back every dollar she has won from me proves it. I'm solid there, and I've no objection to dropping a few dollars at her game to keep solid. I'll have to see that fellow and find out just what he detected, for it is possible that—But, pshaw! she thinks too well of me! Maybe she wanted to scorch him?"

He went on, and when he reached the house he found a man awaiting him, stand-

ing quietly on the shady side of the piazza.

On seeing him, Van Bascomb stopped short.

"Don't be alarmed, sir; I only want a word or two with you," spoke the man, hurriedly, and in low tone, and as he spoke he stepped forth.

"Hello! is it you?" exclaimed the mine-manager, recognizing him as he came into the light. "What do you want a word or two with me about? You are a stranger to me, sir."

The man was Horse Strader.

"I want to see you on business, sir."

"State it."

"Can we not go into the house, where we can talk in private without danger of being overheard?"

"Not until I know who you are and what your business is, sir. I am not in the habit of asking entire strangers into my house. If you are a straight man you can find no fault."

"That's all right, Mr. Van Bascomb. I'll explain," speaking in lower tone still. "Some time ago you sent for one Richard Bristol to come here."

"Ha! is it possible?"

"I am Bristol; otherwise, Deadwood Dick, Jr."

"Why, give me your hand, sir! Ask you in? Well, I should say so!"

They shook hands, and the manager led the way up the steps and into the house closing the door.

He had spoken excitedly, but in low tone.

On entering the sitting-room he found there his daughter, who rose immediately on seeing that her father had company with him.

Van Bascomb stepped forward to her at once, and said:

"I have some private business with this man, Clara. Please retire until he has gone, when we will have our hour's chat, even if it is getting late. He will probably not be here long."

"All right, papa; just as you say."

With a smile she turned and passed out by another door than that by which her father and his guest had entered.

"Now, then, sir, be seated," the mine-manager said, turning immediately to his guest. "We can talk in absolute freedom. I thought it best that even my daughter should not be present."

"Just as well, sir. You have a daughter to be proud of, sir."

"And so I am. But, for the business in hand, you want to know what is wanted of you, of course."

"Exactly."

"You have certainly carried out my suggestion, coming so that no one could possibly guess your identity. The role you are playing is a unique one, and you have managed it to perfection, thus far."

"Have tried to. But, what's the case?"

"A very peculiar one."

"So?"

"Yes, and it may not be in your line at all. Still, I sent for you hoping that you might be able to help us out."

"Let me hear about it."

Thereupon Van Bascomb told the story of the rival mayors, concluding:

"Now, sir, we, the solid men of the camp, the property owners generally, are not satisfied that everything is being conducted honestly here, and we want to find out. That is to say, we did, but now things seem to have taken a more favorable turn, in the minds of some."

"How is that?"

Then he related the matter of the strike and the action McKnight had taken that had raised him in public esteem.

"Has that changed your opinion regarding him?" asked Dick.

"It has not, sir, and for this reason: His only motive in helping me out of the dilemma

is to force me to favor his suit for my daughter's hand."

"Ha! that throws it into a different light. Are there any facts you can give me to work upon, respecting any particular piece of suspected crookedness?"

"No; the whole charge is a general one. We want to know more about him and his methods. And, if he is not right, then we want to oust him, somehow, and restore Zeke Hummingbird to his place."

"And you say he has strong backing?"

"Decidedly strong."

"Well, there will be a way of doing it, I guess. But, if you find him all right, then you are satisfied to leave him where he is?"

"Yes. But, he will not be found that way, Mr. Bristol! He is crooked, and I'm sure of it. Proof, the deal he is trying to effect with me. He would force me to his terms."

"Well, we'll see about him. Have you told me all you can?"

"I cannot think of anything more, sir."

"Go ahead with the plans you have laid, you and your daughter, and I will fall in line. Do not pay any attention to me, for I shall pretend to stand in with McKnight, and whatever appearances are, don't give me away or doubt that I am Deadwood Dick."

"All right, sir, I understand."

"And, meantime, beware of that game of Sparkler Sal's. Don't put up any big money there, if you must play."

"Ha! I wanted to speak to you about that very thing. Are you quite sure she was cheating, when you brought her to a stop in her dealing? Don't you think it possible that you made a mistake?"

"I made a mistake in not reaching for that box at the same moment, that was all, sir. The cheating was sure enough."

"But, they overcame you before you could show it up."

"Exactly. I can't expect to win every hand, or to be on top in every tussle, sir."

"Even if you are Deadwood Dick, eh? But, admitting that she was cheating, is it not possible that it was for your benefit? I hardly think she would cheat me, Mr. Bristol."

"Why not?"

"Well, I'll tell you: I think I have a hold upon her affections."

"If you think that, sir, you never made a greater mistake in your life. Why, she and McKnight worked together against you."

"You think so?"

"I know it. There's something back of it all, you can bet. But, let it go on, and say nothing. By falling in with McKnight I'll be able to get behind the returns—so to say."

"Yes, but you have made the Sparkler your foe, no doubt."

"That's all right; it may lead her to some move against me, and by so doing she may put her foot in it."

"Which I'd rather wouldn't happen, Deadwood Dick. I brought you here to detect McKnight. This woman and I are on good terms, and I'm willing to have it so."

"I guess you are gone on her, Mr. Van Bascomb, rather than the other way. Well, keep your eye peeled, that's all I have got to say."

CHAPTER IX.

BOLDLY ACCUSED.

As soon as Dick had gone, the mine-manager's daughter re-entered the room, and giving her father a hug and a kiss, exclaimed:

"Now, papa, tell me all about it, please. No secrets from me, you know. Who is that man, and what in the world did he want here with you? I'm full of curiosity, you see."

"Yes, seeing that we are plotting to-

gether, Clara, I'll tell you," said the mine-manager, drawing his child to a seat beside him. And forthwith he gave her an understanding of the situation, excepting, of course, that part that concerned himself and the gambler queen.

But, to follow Deadwood Dick.

He went to the hotel, where he found his man, Mongrel Mike, in the bar-room.

Signals were exchanged while Dick made inquiry openly as to how the horses were, signals that were understood but unobserved.

Dick lighted a cigar, and presently McKnight came in.

He joined Dick at once, with the remark:

"That was quite a blunder you made in the Cosmopolitan, Strader. Was sorry it happened."

"So was I, afterwards," answered Dick.

"It was none of my business if she was inclined to lighten that rich fellow's pocket a little. I was too hasty."

"Then you insist on it?"

"I hope you don't take me for a tenderfoot, do you?"

"Well, no, not by a good deal. But, see here, I thought you and I understood each other, that we were to pull together."

"I've no objection to that, as I gave you to understand. I was too hasty, I admit, but, it was done before I took time to think of the result. Too late to undo the mischief, now."

"Maybe not."

"What do you mean?"

"You might make a public apology, you know, admitting that you must have been mistaken."

"Whew! That's asking a good deal of me, isn't it? That would be to make a laughingstock of myself, after the action I took there in the saloon."

"Then what do you propose? You have hurt the business, you see."

"Can you make it an object for me to take water? There must be a scheme on foot."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. Let me in, and I'll see what can be done."

"No, there's no scheme, only that the woman and I stand in together, that is all."

"And that's a secret between you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I won't mention it, of course, now that you have put me on my guard. If I can help you any, let me know."

"The fact of the matter is right here: We don't want to lose our grip upon that man, but what you have said may scare him off. We were not done with him, yet, Mr. Strader."

"You needn't be afraid of losing him," assumed Dick.

"Think not?"

"Pretty certain of it. I can see that he is dead stuck on that woman pard of yours, and she can do about as she pleases with him."

"That's our game; that's what we want."

"You have got it, then. But, you know what you are talking about; I don't. I suppose you mean to lead him on to playing high stakes, and then clean him out, eh?"

"Well, maybe so. Enough said."

"Just as you please about that."

Dick puffed at his cigar in the coolest and most careless fashion, as if he cared nothing about the matter, one way or the other.

While they were talking several men entered the room, and looking around, one of their number advanced a step toward Deadwood Dick, when, pointing with his finger, he cried:

"That's ther man, an' I'll swear to him!"

Dick was on his feet in an instant, with his hand at his hip, and looked at the fellow.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "What man do you say I am? What's the row with you, anyhow?"

"He's ther cuss!" the fellow reasserted. "I'd know his voice 'mong a thousand."

The others advanced, but Dick's hand fell upon the gun in his holster, and they held back prudently.

"What's up?" Dick sternly demanded. "Speak up quick, now!"

"You ar' a hoss-thief, that's what," the fellow openly charged, and boldly.

"And you are a liar. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

One of the group now stepped forward, without any hostile movement that might draw a bullet, and said:

"This man claims that one of the horses in your drove belongs to a pard of his, sir, and also that you are the notorious outlaw and horse-thief, Texas Tough. My name is Whit Simpson, and I'm the deputy-sheriff here. What do you say for yourself on the charge?"

"I have told you what I have to say. The fellow lies!"

"But, he has taken oath to it. Can you prove the contrary? It is my duty to arrest you."

"Thar's the other," the accuser cried, pointing out Mongrel Mike. "I don't know what he calls himself hyer, but he is Hoss-thief Hank, dead sure."

"Liar again!" that fellow cried boldly. "I'm pard to Horse Strader, an' I ain't nothin' else. Never seen Texas in my life, ef it comes to that. Your dorg has started the wrong game, stranger."

"Not a bit of et," persisted the fellow, who was called Dick Becker. "I know my pard's hoss, an' I know you!"

"See here, fellow," cried Dick, "you claim to know a good deal about horse-thieves and the like. Maybe you have been in that line yourself?"

"I know a pard's hoss when I see et."

"Supposing we have such an animal: can't you admit it possible that we got it in the way of trade?"

"Haw! haw! What, when I know ther both of ye? Well, I guess not!"

"Well, you are mightily mistaken, or you lie, one or the other. If you are lying, you'll have to answer for it sooner or later, and that to me."

"This bluster is no proof," here put in deputy-sheriff. "It is my duty to arrest you, and you can just consider yourselves my prisoners, unless you can show up innocent."

"Well, you have our word, two against one."

"It won't go, for he accuses both, and gives your names. I arrest you, and I warn you not to resist. Consider yourselves prisoners."

"What's the use of making believe something that isn't so?" demanded Dick. "I don't believe in playing prisoner till I am one. If we are arrested, as you say, just come and take us, that's all."

Dick and Mongrel Mike, with their backs to the wall, faced the crowd, guns in their grip.

"Just let me have a word here," put in McKnight. "Is this the first time you have seen these men since they came here, Dick Becker?"

"Yes," the sullen answer.

"And what was it set you after them now?"

"I was lookin' at their stock, round in ther stables, an' I spotted my pard's critter at sight, an' I said at oncet et had been stolen, an' that I'd bet these hyer fellers was thieves."

"And you set out to prove it, eh?"

"That's w'ot I done."

"And you went to your deputy-sheriff before you had seen me or my pard?" demanded Dick.

"Yes, fer ef I could prove ye up I wanted him right on hand, an' now that I hev done

et, he's goin' to see you through, you kin bet!"

"That's what's ther matter!" cried the others.

"Yes, but don't get there before you arrive," advised Dick, coolly. "You say thus and so, but in the matter of proof you don't produce anything. I say you are a liar. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

That was the question.

Dick held the best hand—a brace of fives! There was an awkward pause, and the deputy did not see his way out of it.

"I'll tell you what you had better do," suggested Dick; "you had better forego the arresting for the present, Mr. Deputy, till this fellow brings up his proof. In the mean time I think your mayor here will answer for me; eh, mayor?"

"That's a good idea," assented McKnight. "So be it, Simpson."

CHAPTER X.

"MURDER! MURDER!"

By his looks it could be seen plainly enough that the deputy-sheriff did not take kindly to this proposition.

As for Dick Becker, there was no doubt as to his stand in the matter. The expression on his face went to prove that he stood in favor of a "hanging bee" there and then.

"Yas, but ain't my word no good?" demanded Becker, irately.

"It is no better than mine, sir, that is certain," Dick retorted.

"Wull, et orter be, ef it ain't. Pard, ef ye leave 'em loose they will git away."

"Ef they do, what more do you ask of them?" asked the mayor. "That would take the trouble off our hands in the easiest possible manner, wouldn't it?"

"An' my pard's boss would be lost."

"Don't worry," placated Dick. "We are not going away in a hurry. Bring up your proofs and we will be here to meet them. In the mean time, if you have any horse-flesh to dicker trot it around."

This brought a laugh from the crowd, and the deputy-sheriff and those with him could do nothing.

"Wull, you'll regret et, when he cleans out ther camp," growled Becker. "He orter swing, that's what he had, an' his pard with him. You'll find him out 'fore you git done wi' him, Jimmie McKnight."

"Very likely."

With a growl Becker turned and left the room, and McKnight drew aside to a distant seat with Simpson.

"What the deuce is up?" the mayor asked.

"A job."

"So I see; but who is back of it?"

"The Sparkler."

"That's what I thought. She has made a mistake, and this thing must be nipped in the bud. I'll see her at once."

"She has got it in for this fellow, bad."

"Suppose she has. Had no chance to speak to her before I left the Hall. But, you let up on the business, and fix Becker, and I'll pretend that I have fixed it, somehow. That will give me a pull with this fellow."

"All right."

"Better to have him with us than against us, you know."

"So I should say. He's a tough customer to buck against."

"Well, see Becker and give him a ten, which I'll make good to you, and he'll have to own that he was mistaken."

"All right. It don't make any difference to him, so long as he gets the money. He was to get more, but I'll scare him out of the difference by telling him this fellow is gunnin' for him."

"Ha! ha! Yes, put it to him that way."

They parted, and McKnight rejoined Bristol.

"I guess it is all right," he said. "I have fixed the deputy; told him I was sure Becker was mistaken, and that I would be responsible for you and your pard. He will see Becker at once and that will end it, I guess."

"Good enough. Much obliged to you for the favor. But, take my word for it, there was nothing in the fellow's charge."

"I'll take your word for it; don't care a cent one way or the other."

"All right; but that's straight."

McKnight went out, returning to the Cosmopolitan, where the games were still in progress.

When, finally, Sparkler Sal closed her bank, McKnight accompanied her over to the Hardscrabble Inn, where she had a room, and as they left the Hall the woman said:

"Well, have they jugged them?"

"No, and won't. You made a mistake in that move."

"A mistake? I guess not!"

McKnight explained what he meant.

"But, how did you get at it so quick?" he asked. "It could have been made a bad charge against the fellow if I had pushed it."

"I knew that, and certainly thought you would push it. The idea came to me, and seeing Becker at the same time I put him up to the business. That man is dangerous for us."

"You think so?"

"I'd swear to it, almost."

"I think you are mistaken. He is not exactly on the square, and he is falling into a friendly line with me so that I can make use of him if I want to."

"Well, I won't put my judgment against yours, but I'll take good care that he gets no hold upon me if I can help it."

"All right, Sal, be on your guard. But, I haven't told you the news, which is more important than all this."

"What's that?"

"Van Bascomb has come to my terms."

A cloud came over the face of the woman sport, while she said pleasantly:

"That's good."

"Yes, and now it only remains for me to win the girl and our way will be wide open. You can do about as you please with the old man, that is sure."

"Yes, I think I can. He is stuck on me, now."

"I see he is."

"How about the miners?"

"The trouble will be settled in the morning, and I will be the most popular man in the camp. Then you want to get in your fine work just as soon as possible."

"I'll do it, you bet!"

Next morning the men of the Marguerite went to work as usual.

There was no excitement in the camp, and it was as though no trouble of any kind was under the surface.

At an early hour Sam Claffinger and two others from the mines made their appearance at the mine office, where the mine-manager was waiting to receive them.

There was a goodly crowd outside, and in the office were Mayor McKnight, Zeke Hummingbird, and some others who were especially interested in the matter and eager to see how it would come out.

Van Bascomb met the committee at the door, before they could enter.

The others within the office stepped outside, a plan that had been arranged so that all might hear.

"Wull, boss, what's ther word?" demanded Claffinger.

"I am going to be honest with you, my men," was the answer. "We must come to a fair compromise, or the mines must be abandoned."

"What! 'Bandon ther Marguerite?"

"That's what I said; and you know what that will mean for Hardscrabble—it will be a good deal harder scrabble for you boys than it is now. But, I don't want you to take my word for it, so let the mayor tell you."

"And that I'll do, willingly," spoke up McKnight.

"Wull, what is et?" asked Claffinger.

"Well," said the mayor, "I have seen something of the private accounts of the Marguerite, and I tell you honestly, I was surprised. You know what a boom means, don't you? Well, this mine is a boom, and that's all it is nearly. It pays, of course, but not as well as has been generally thought."

"Is that ther fact?"

"Nothing but the cold, hard truth. Such a demand as you have made would shut it down this day and for all time. It is out of the question. But, if you will take an increase of five per cent. all around, until such time as the mine pans richer, if it ever does, that will work good for you and good for the mine, too. It will boom the boom along, and the extrawill buy your tobacco and something more."

"Look hyer, mayor, ar' you givin' us a straight deal?"

"Straight as can be, and right from the top of the deck. Now, you can make or you can break Hardscrabble, just as you please."

"Tell ye what I'll do, boss: I'll call out every man of 'em, and let 'em speak fer themselves. This is more of a come down than they have 'llowed me ter make fer 'em, an' so I can't do nothin', you see."

"Call them out!" the mine-manager requested.

The word was passed in a hurry, and the miners, who had been idly waiting to learn the result, but out of sight, were on the ground in short order.

When the situation was fully explained to them, some fellow in the crowd proposed that the proposition be accepted, and immediately the whole crowd gave a whoop of approval.

It proved to those who saw through it all, that McKnight had a grip upon the camp that would indeed be hard to break."

"That settles et!" said Sam Claffinger, "an' I'm glad et is settled. After I had slept on ther strike, I wasn't near so full o' fight as I had been afore. Now, I say three cheers fer McKnight!"

The cheers were given; but, just as the last shout ended a woman's scream was heard, and a woman came running breathless in the direction of the office, crying:

"Murder! murder! murder!"

CHAPTER XI.

HARDSCRABBLE SHAKEN.

In a second everything else was forgotten.

Every eye turned in the direction of the woman, and she was recognized by all present.

It was Van Bascomb's housekeeper.

"What's the matter?" demanded the mine-manager, running forward.

"Miss Clara! My God, sir, she has been murdered in her bed as she slept! Oh! what shall I do?"

The mine-manager had clapped his hand to his head, and was reeling like a drunken man; and he would have fallen had not "Horse Strader"—to give him that name still, sprung forward and caught him.

The whole crowd stood as if struck dumb.

Never, in all its history, had Hardscrabble seen a moment like this.

Clara Van Bascomb was loved by every man, woman and child in the camp, almost, and the shock was paralyzing."

The housekeeper was still wringing her hands and exclaiming excitedly, and for

some seconds no other voice was heard. Then, suddenly came the reaction, and the crowd roared the words:

"Revenge! Revenge!"

"Yas," thundered Sam Claffinger, "let us find ther cuss what done a deed like that, an' see what we'll do wi' him!"

"This must be searched out," cried McKnight, white to the lips and almost as unnerved as the mine-manager, himself. "The guilty one must be found, and then we'll show how Hardscrabble will deal with him."

"And searched out he will be, too, I swear it!" cried Henry Keefer. "I'll run him to earth if it takes me a lifetime to do the work!"

"My child dead?" moaned the stricken father. "My Clara taken from me? No, no, it cannot be, for only yesterday I saw her in life and health. My God, woman, deny it, and tell me it is not true!"

"Oh, sir, if I only could! If I only could!"

Clara was not up when her father left the house, but he had thought nothing of that. Occasionally she slept later than usual; so her nonappearance on this morning caused him no alarm, and the blow had come like a lightning bolt out of a clear sky.

"Brace up, sir!" spoke Deadwood Dick, kindly. "Forget nothing."

The last words in whisper.

"But, sir, my child—"

"It is terrible, but you must bear up. Woman, are you sure of this?"

He turned to the housekeeper.

"Yes, yes; did I not see the dear girl on her bed, white as death, and the blood staining her garments and the bed? Do not ask me that."

"You spoke to her?"

"Heavens! I screamed!"

"And you felt of her heart? you examined?"

"No, no; I just run here as fast as ever I could, and that is all I could do."

"Come, Mr. Van Bascomb! let us go to the house," commanded Dick. "Do not despair from what you have heard."

"You think she may be alive?"

"I dare not hold out that hope to you, sir. But, be brave."

Then aloud:

"Men of Hardscrabble, I am hardly the one to accompany this gentleman, as I am a stranger, and if some nearer friend will relieve me—"

"No, no; you are all right," was the shout.

"Well, if you say so, so be it. Now, sir, can you stand, do you think?"

With an effort Mr. Van Bascomb recovered himself, and saying simply "Come," went rapidly toward the cottage.

McKnight, Keefer, and others, went with him, while the whole crowd surged behind. Deadwood Dick kept near McKnight, as if passing upon his credit.

There was a loud murmur in the throng, as they advanced, but the nearer they came to the cottage the more subdued the voices became, of these rough men, as for the most part they were.

Reaching the cottage, Mr. Van Bascomb ran up the steps and entered in haste.

The others, or as many as felt privileged to do so, followed close at his heels, and among these Dick, still with McKnight.

"Guess I won't be noticed in the excitement," he observed.

"Maybe not," was the response, briefly.

At the same time McKnight gave him a keen look, which Dick did not lose, although at loss for its meaning.

At the door of the room the others stopped, while the father entered.

His sob was heard.

On the bed lay his daughter, apparently dead, with blood upon her breast and upon the snowy coverings.

"No, no, she is not dead!" was heard im-

mediately after. "Haste for the doctor, some one! Some one bring water! Some one come here—you, sir—you will do!"

He caught sight of Dick, who entered promptly.

"If I can do anything, command me," Dick said aloud. "And, meantime, I'll cast my eye around here," in much lower tone.

This he did, sweeping the room with his keen, never missing eyes.

"Ha!" and with the exclamation he sprung and picked up something from the floor.

Every other man who had been near the door had hastened to obey the first two commands, so Dick was unobserved.

"What did you say?" asked the mine-manager, chafing his child's arm.

"I have found a clue, sir. Say nothing, but leave the solving of this mystery to me."

"What have you found?"

"Dare not show you now."

Steps were coming, and water was brought immediately.

This was dashed into the face of the unconscious girl, and Dick ventured near.

He had not shared the fond father's hope that she still lived, but on looking close he found that it was so. She was breathing.

Efforts were made to restore her, pending the arrival of the doctor, and Deadwood Dick's touch was as gentle as a woman's as he examined the wound, having asked permission.

"Do you think she will live?" asked Van Bascomb.

"She will live," answered Dick. "This wound is not fatal. The knife has struck no vital part."

Just then the girl opened her eyes, and Dick stepped promptly back, as did also the others, leaving her father alone to meet the gaze.

He motioned the rest from the room.

Now that his daughter was conscious, this was a sacred place not to be profaned by the presence of strangers.

"Papa!" was the feeble exclamation.

"Clara!" the response. "Thank God you will live, my child."

"Have I been sick, papa? What has happened? Heavens! now I remember the dark form in the night."

"Then you saw your assassin?"

"I saw some one, and then I felt a shock. What was it, papa? What— Good heavens, this blood!"

"You were stabbed, my child, by some one. Can you not tell me who it was? Can you not describe the wretch, so that we can arrest him?"

"No, no. I only saw a dark form in the darkened room, that was all."

At that moment the door opened and the one doctor of the camp hastened in, together with the housekeeper.

Meanwhile Deadwood Dick had left the house immediately on his exit from the room, and gone in the direction of the camp center, as if having no business there, stranger that he was.

He entered the Cosmopolitan.

It was early morning, as will be remembered, and this was the dullest hour for the leading saloon.

"What's matter up there?" asked the manager on duty. "Did the men strike after all? But, what are they doing over there by the cottage?"

"Haven't you heard?" asked Dick.

"Heard nothin'. Fact is I have been more'n half asleep in my chair here for an hour."

"Why, the mine-manager's daughter has been murdered—"

"Murdered! Clara Van Bascomb?"

"Yes."

"Great heavens! this cannot be true!"

It was another voice that so exclaimed, and the speaker was Sparkler Sal, who entered at that moment by a rear door.

CHAPTER XII.

AN ARREST FOR THE MURDER.

SHORT as the time had been, these were probably the only ones in the camp who had not heard of it already.

On the part of the manager of the place, it was owing to the fact that he had been sound asleep in his chair, instead of only half asleep as he declared.

While for The Sparkler, let us take her own explanation.

Deadwood Dick turned upon her instantly, taking a good look at her in one swift survey.

She was pale, and her eyes had a wild look in them that showed excitement, which might have been occasioned by this news or something else; Dick could not determine.

"It is only too true, madam," Dick assured.

"That Clara Van Bascomb is dead?"

"Not dead; she is still alive; but an attempt was made upon her life."

"The wretch! whoever it might have been! Have they any suspicion who it was did the deed?"

"I believe they have a clue," was answered.

"And to whom does it point?"

"That I cannot tell you, madam."

She had advanced to the bar, where she called for a soda.

It is getting so that one cannot sleep in this camp after the breakfast hour, scarcely," she complained. "That shouting awhile ago awakened me, and there was no further rest for me. I had to get up or suffer a headache."

"I find it a lively town," remarked Dick, carelessly.

"By the way," after emptying her glass, "you are ready to admit that you made a mistake regarding my cheating last night?"

"I did not prove it against you," Dick evaded.

"Nor could you. I'll take it as a favor if you will make public apology to me when chance offers."

"I'll think about that. That is asking a good deal, madam, and since I did not have the chance to examine your card-box, how can I know that I was mistaken?"

"Then you will not apologize?"

"I do not say so."

"No, you say nothing."

"Anyhow, that is all forgotten," urged Dick. "The camp has got something else to think about now."

She turned from him and took a seat.

There was no thought of work, and the street was thronged with idle men.

Some of these came into the saloon, but for the most part they stood around in groups, talking.

Presently Mayor McKnight came in.

"Give me pen and paper, Tim," he demanded of the man at the bar. "This mystery has got to be solved, and I'll see what effect a reward will have."

The things were provided, and he hastily wrote a notice in a bold hand.

In the center of the street was a high post, where such things were usually put up, and on this post the notice was placed.

It read thus:

REWARD.

FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD for the arrest of the person who last night attempted to murder Clara Van Bascomb.

JAS. MCKNIGHT, Mayor.

The crowd surged eagerly around this notice to read it, and there was a constant buzz of comment.

Said one man:

"Ef I could find him I wouldn't charge a darn cent, you bet!"

And that appeared to be the general sentiment.

While they were still there, in a crowd, a shout was heard, and Whit Simpson the deputy-sheriff was seen coming around the Hardscrabble Inn with a prisoner.

That prisoner was Mongrel Mike.

"Hillo!" cried some one, "what means this hyer?"

"A prisoner, by jokus!" cried another.

"Yas, an' mebbly he's ther man what done the deed!"

They all surged forward to meet Simpson, to learn what the arrest meant.

The deputy had hold of his prisoner by the arm, and had a revolver pressed behind his ear to govern him.

"What's this mean?" cried McKnight.

"It means a prisoner," the answer.

"I see, but on what charge?"

"Murder."

"The deuce! What proof have you against him? You think he is the man who tried to kill Miss Van Bascomb?"

"That's what I do; look at that 'ar sleeve."

The deputy had now come up with his prisoner, and, as Simpson spoke, he pointed at the prisoner's right sleeve.

It was smeared with blood.

"How came this blood here?" cried McKnight.

"I don't know," the answer.

"You don't know? That's a likely story, that is!"

"It's the truth."

"How did you get onto him, Simpson?"

"I thought maybe I might find blood on somebody, and I set out to look at every man and woman in the camp. Nat'rally I took in the worst ones first, and here is the result."

"Hello! Mike, what means this?"

This inquiry came from "Horse Strader," who just then appeared to the front.

"Means that I have got some blood on my arm, an' that I'm 'rested for the murder of that gal."

"This looks serious. How did you get the blood on you?"

"That's a mystery to me."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the crowd. "That's a likely story, that is!"

"Nevertheless, I believe it," declared Deadwood Dick—Strader. "I have known this fellow some time, and he is straight."

"Yes, he looks et!"

"He's your pard, an' you would stand by him, anyhow!"

"An' ef he did do ther deed, mebbly you had a hand in et, too; we can't swear to et."

"Well, you want to go slow till you are sure. Mike, are you sure that blood wasn't there before you went to sleep?"

"Dead sure."

"Where did you sleep?"

"On ther main floor of the big part of ther stables."

"And you slept with this shirt on, of course. Somebody must have put the blood on you."

"I don't see how else."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the crowd. "That's wuss an' wuss, that is."

"They ar' both guilty!" shouted some fellow. "We'll make no mistake by hangin' 'em right up!"

"You'll make a mistake if you try it, I warn you," retorted Dick, displaying a brace of fivers. "I certainly am innocent, and I mean to stand by my man till he is proven guilty."

"What more proof do you ask?" cried Simpson.

He pointed at the sleeve.

"A great deal more, sir," thundered Dick.

"Would you claim that this blood was smeared on that man's sleeve in the act of striking the blow that wounded Miss Van Bascomb?"

"Et looks s'picious."

"Not to me it doesn't, sir! The victim has not bled a great quantity, and certainly

not quickly enough to make a daub like this at once."

"Then you 'splain et."

"I think some one has daubed this man's sleeve for effect."

"Git out! Who would do that?"

"The would be assassin himself, of course."

"What d'ye think, pards?"

"Et don't go down," was the cry.

"String 'em both up!" another voice shouted.

"Go slow about it, boys!" spoke McKnight coolly. "We must get at this thing right. We mustn't do anything while hot-headed that we may be sorry for afterwards."

"What loss is a fellow like this?"

"He has a right to his life, sir," cried Dick, "and I'm going to defend it, you can bet!"

"Le's see ef he kin," cried some fellow unseen. "Le's string ther cuss up anyhow, pards, an' show him that we ar' ther people hyer yet!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SPARKLER'S CONCERN.

This was shouted from somewhere in the crowd.

In such throngs there is always some one ready to make the excitement of the moment greater if possible.

At the same time there was a push, and those in front were moved forward a step in the direction of where "Horse Strader" was standing.

Dick raised his guns to the level.

"None of that," he sternly commanded.

"If you are seeking trouble, that is about the surest way of making it."

"Yes, none of that!" supported McKnight, placing himself beside Dick, he also with weapons in hand. "No one is more anxious than I to find out the guilty person, but I want proof—dead-sure proof and no mere guessing."

"You aire right," voted Zeke Hummingbird, as he also placed himself in line. "I hope we ar' men of law an' order, ready ter give a poor devil a fair trial fore we send him off. I fer one am 'gainst any hangin', hyer, an' I back up ther mayor-what-is in this thing!"

There were instantly others, and the lynching was nipped in the bud.

"Now, I'll tell you what I propose," spoke up Dick. "You have a calaboose here, I suppose?"

"You bet!"

"Well, lodge this prisoner in it, guard him well and use him well, and give me a fair chance to prove him innocent if I can. What say?"

"That's a good idea," McKnight immediately fell in. "I am determined that the guilty wretch shall suffer, but I want to take no chances; proof positive must be forthcoming."

This meant business in the right shape, and the crowd gave way.

Mongrel Mike was lodged in the calaboose, and "Horse Strader" and the mayor had a talk.

"Don't you think that we can work this out together?" McKnight asked.

"It is possible; or, we might work separately."

"Yes, either way, but you have a motive as well as I. You want to clear your man Mike, and I must revenge the deed that so nearly cost my promised bride her life."

"Your promised bride?"

"Yes."

"Let me congratulate you. By the way, had you a rival?"

"Well, yes, I had such, but it is not to be supposed that he would do a thing like this."

"No matter; who is he?"

"Keefer, the superintendent of the Marguerite."

"He's the man, eh? But, I agree with you that he did not do the deed."

"Who in the name of heavens did?"

"Give it up."

"And yet you think you can clear your man?"

"I'm going to try, at any rate."

"And are you anything of a detective?"

"That remains to be seen."

"What I was going to say: if you are, help me in running down the guilty one and I'll handsomely reward you."

"Well, we'll see what we can do. Now that I have an interest in it, I'll begin to nose around a little. I felt as if it was none of my business before. There is Sparkler-Sal."

She was on the piazza of the hotel.

McKnight looked, and she motioned to him.

"Well, so-long, Strader!" he said. "See you later."

Dick responded by a wave of the hand, and sauntered on.

The mayor joined the woman.

"What terrible thing has happened?" she asked, at once. "Is it really true— But, it is folly to ask that now. Still, it does not seem possible."

"What?"

"That Clara Van Bascomb has been killed—that is, that some one has tried to kill her. Do you think the man arrested is the right one?"

"Impossible to say. He'll swing if he is, be sure of that."

"Then it seems that you really cared for that girl, after all," with something of a sneer and fire in her eye.

"Can't you understand?" cried McKnight. "Suppose she had been killed, all our plans would be knocked in the head! Even as it is there must now be a great delay, all for nothing."

"And if it had been fatal—"

"All the work to do over again, in that case, in some other way."

"But is there not some other way? She may die anyhow, and it will pay us to look around."

"I guess she is not so badly hurt that she will not get over it, and I will have to wait. And, too, this sets your own plans back a little, for Dave will not be inclined to make love for a few days, anyhow."

"I suppose not; but, we'll make the best of it. If Clara had been killed, let us suppose, how would you have managed it?"

"Well, a forged will and a forged marriage certificate, you appearing as his widow to scoop everything—"

"Excellent! That is better than the other way, a good deal."

"I don't know about that, for there is a greater risk to run, and the chance that we might get tripped up."

"Yes, but see how much quicker it would be!"

"If it worked well; but, it might not work well. The relations would swoop down, and might be able to oust us; but, if the marriages were genuine, then we could kick them out."

"I would be willing to take the risk."

"It will not be necessary, for we can afford to wait a little while."

"And it is this waiting that is killing me, James. If you only knew how I hate the table, and how much I love you!"

"I know all about it, Sparkler. But, be patient just a little while, and all will come out right. A couple of marriages, a couple of accidents in some manner or fashion, and the way will be clear."

In the mean time Deadwood Dick had gone on in the direction of the Van Bascomb cottage.

"What is that man going there again for?" the woman asked.

"Why, it is his man that has been arrest-

ed, you know, and he is determined to clear him."

"And how does he hope to do it?"

"By finding the guilty one and bringing the proof home to him."

The woman appeared pale, and toyed nervously with her fingers as her hands lay in her lap.

"And do you think he can do it?"

"He swears he will do it; and, for that matter, so do I."

"You?"

"Yes, I! I will not be balked in what I undertake, without paying back the score."

Her face was pale now, decidedly, but she was doing her best to control her feelings and hide her agitation, though not successfully.

"What is the matter with you?" McKnight bluntly asked.

"The matter?" with an effort to smile.

"What do you see in me to make you ask?"

"You are pale, nervous, excited; that is plain."

"The thought of danger alarms me, that's all. Suppose this murderer should kill you, what would life be worth to me?"

"Pshaw! you would soon find another to take my place—"

"Never! as you ought to know. How could I love another?"

"Well, I am not getting killed just yet, Sparkler. We'll work together on this matter, you and I, and if we can bring the assassin down that will give us so much the stronger grip."

"Yes, you are right in saying that. I will help you all I can—I will lay down my life for you, if need be."

"I believe you would. But, here's the doctor."

A man was just approaching from the direction of the cottage, and the Mayor of Hardscrabble stopped him.

"Well, what is the word?" he asked.

"The young lady will live and get well," was answered.

"Then she was not so hard hit as was thought at first, eh? That is good."

"No, and everything is in her favor. In fact, she will be up and around in a few days."

"Is she still in the same room?" asked Sparkler Sal.

"Yes, in her own room, where she will remain."

"Of course; naturally she would remain there, and yet I thought maybe she would be afraid. But, some one will watch her now. Some one should."

Had she a reason for suggesting that?

The doctor passed on.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SHOT AND A QUICK DODGE.

DEADWOOD DICK had gone on, as said, to the cottage.

Arriving there, he met the doctor and had a brief talk with him, after which he asked for Mr. Van Bascomb.

The mine-manager appeared.

There was a brighter look upon his face decidedly.

"I suppose you have come to ask how my child is?" he spoke at once. "Well, she is better, and will get well, the doctor assures me."

"Glad to hear that, sir. Yes, I came to ask you that, and more. I am going to take hold of this thing and try to sift it."

"Why, of course—"

The manager caught himself.

"Yes," Dick caught him up, so that he might give nothing away to those who stood around. "You see, my man has been charged with the deed, and believing him to be innocent, I am going to find the guilty one if I can."

"I see. Well, it will please me if you succeed. Come right in, sir."

And so "Horse Strader" entered.

"That for the benefit of other ears, Mr. Van Bascomb," he said, immediately. "I believe I am on track of the guilty one."

"So soon?"

"Yes."

"Who is it?"

"I will retain that just for the present. Your daughter will occupy the same room to-night?"

"Certainly."

"And some one will be with her?"

"The housekeeper, and perhaps a neighbor besides."

"The first-mentioned will be enough."

"What do you mean?"

"I suspect that another attempt will be made on the young lady's life to-night, sir, seeing that the first was not successful."

"Good heavens!"

"Had you not thought of it?"

"I had not. The one thought, that she lives, has been enough."

"Yes, I understand, sir. That attempt was not made without an object to gain, you must know."

"But, who can tell what that object was?"

"I can."

"What was it, then?"

"Just a little time, Mr. Van Bascomb. Now, I purpose staying in this house to-night myself."

"You are free to do so, sir, I am sure—shall be glad to have it so."

"And, sir, along in the evening you will secretly remove your daughter from the room she is now in and place her in another. Of course you trust the housekeeper fully."

"Certainly."

"Well, she is no doubt all right. Then, I will take charge of the other room myself, and remain there."

"And you say you want this done, secretly?"

"Yes, so that no one may know anything about it, sir."

"It shall be done as you request. But, when will you come in?"

"Some time during the evening, after the light in the room has been turned low. You can show me through the house now, so that I will know my way, and then leave a rear door open for me, if you desire."

"I will be on hand to admit you."

"Better still."

Dick was shown through the house, and he made a further study of the room in which the attempted assassination had taken place.

One of the windows opened upon a porch, and at the end of the porch was a strong trellis, which Dick had noticed before, but he had had no opportunity to examine closely.

Now that he could do so, acting as he was in the behalf of his man, he made a careful examination.

While doing so he noted that he was watched by McKnight and the Sparkler, from the piazza of the Hardscrabble Inn.

"I shall have to take care," the Wild West Vidocq said to himself.

He found that the assassin had gained entrance by this means, but there was no further clue, except that the person had been neither very large nor very heavy, two things plainly apparent.

Finally he took his leave and sauntered back to the hotel.

The Sparkler was there still, but now alone. She stopped him.

"I understand you are going to play the detective, sir?" she accosted.

"Yes, it has been forced upon me," answered Dick. "Whether I shall succeed or not remains to be seen. I must clear my man, if I can."

"I saw you examining the porch roof and the trellis."

"Yes, that's true."

"Do you think the assassin gained entrance that way?"

"No doubt of it, I should say."

"Then of course you will remain on guard there to-night, and the window will be secured."

"I think not, madam. What's the use? Certainly it won't be tried on again."

"You surprise me! I should think every precaution would be taken, now, fearful that another attempt might be made."

"Not at all likely. You see, if the rascal has left the camp he does not know that he did not make a good job of his dastardly work; if here, he will be afraid to try it again, for fear there will be watchers. No, Miss Van Bascomb is just as safe without a guard around the house as with one."

"I had not thought of it in that light, sir. Fear will keep the rascal from trying it again; of course it will. But, do I understand that you have a clue to the man who made the attempt?"

"Well, yes; I will not deny it; I think I have a clue, madam."

"May I ask where it points?"

"I am not prepared to let that out yet. There is such a thing as a mistake, you know, possible to be made, and I don't want to accuse the wrong person."

"That is true. Well, I certainly hope you will be able to place the crime where it belongs, sir. Not that your man is anything to me, but such a deed cannot go unavenged."

"My man is something to me, madam, and I assure you that he shall not swing for another's crime if I can prevent it."

"That is your plain duty, sir, seeing that he is your pard. But, Mr. Strader, will you answer one question before you go?"

"What is it?"

"Is Mr. McKnight doing all he can to solve the mystery?"

"That is a question you had better ask him yourself, madam. He was here with you only a few minutes ago."

"I have a reason for asking you."

"Well, he declared that to be his intention."

"And he has asked you to aid him?"

"He said he would reward me handsomely if I would, and could bring the guilty one to account."

The woman's lips were set, and her face pale.

"That is all, sir," she said. "I suppose you are still determined not to offer me apology?"

"Let my answer to that be the same as before. I will think about it. It is asking a good deal, as I have already told you. Let's attend to the more important matter first."

"This is important to me, sir. No one ever accused me of cheating before."

"No one ever caught you before, perhaps."

"Ha! you would push the insult down my throat? Have a care, sir, how you excite me!"

"I am not going to deny that I thought I saw you cheat, for that would be to make a fool of myself. I have to admit that I did not prove it against you; I was allowed no chance."

"I see you intend to make no apology."

"If I make one, it will be on that very line, madam."

"Which would be no apology at all. You have insulted me grossly!" in a loud tone. "Take that!"

Quick as a flash she drew a revolver, and fired point-blank at Deadwood Dick's head. Her intention was plainly to kill him, but her intention was not realized.

CHAPTER XV.

SOME PECULIAR MOVES.

IT was something for which Deadwood Dick was not looking, but all the same he

saw the move; he knew what was coming; he could have drawn and fired first if he had desired, but that he did not want to do.

He thought and reasoned a whole argument for and against, in the briefest fraction of time, and followed that thought up with action that saved his life and cheated the woman's purpose.

Moving his head as she stretched her arm, and reaching out at the same time with his left arm and touching the weapon with his finger, he felt the bullet flit along his sleeve as it left the weapon, and it did not escape his head by many inches. However, it had missed the mark.

Dick was as cool as ice.

Running steps were heard instantly, as men rushed to the scene, drawn by the report of the weapon.

"You meant business that time, madam, no denying it," Dick observed. "Put up your weapon and do not try it again, or I shall have to disregard your sex and properly defend myself."

"You cur! You coward!" the woman cried, her eyes flashing with indignation and her voice raised to a high pitch. "I ought to kill you where you stand!"

"On second thought, lest you might try it again, I'll take that gun," said Dick.

He moved even as he spoke, or sooner, and as gently as possible wrested the pistol from her grasp.

"What means this?"

So demanded Mayor McKnight, running out from the bar-room.

"It means that I have been most grossly insulted, that is what it means!" the woman cried.

"And that she meant to kill me if she could," added Deadwood Dick.

"Which would have served you right," cried McKnight. "You must understand, sir, that this woman, though a card-queen, is none the less a lady, and I will stand in her defense!"

"In which you are right," asserted Dick. "But, I am not aware that I have offered her any insult."

"You lie!" cried the woman.

"Will you repeat what I have said, then?"

"Repeat what you have said! Sir, do you mean to add this as another insult?"

"Not by any means, madam. You say I have insulted you; I claim that I have not. It is a question of which tells the truth."

"And you have been told that you lie."

"Which I deny. It would be impolite to a lady to say more. You asked me to apologize for saying I had caught you cheating at cards, and I merely said I would think about it, and—"

"Mr. McKnight, will you believe him against me?"

"Never!" cried the mayor. "Mr. Strader, come with me, and let us have this settled. I take the matter up for this lady."

"How many paces?" asked Dick.

"No, no, not too quick about that; I am willing to let you explain, and if you will apologize it may be settled without any blood-letting."

"I shall make no apology," said "Horse Strader," decisively.

"Then, curse you, we may as well have it out here and at once. I allow no man to insult a lady in my hearing without taking it up for her! Come, and it shall be your life or my own, sir!"

"You had better be sure you are right before you go ahead, sir. Have I insulted this lady in your hearing?"

"I take her word for it; it is all the same."

"Let her say in what way I have insulted her."

"Not necessary. Come, the crowd will make room for us, and a couple of shots will do the business for one of us."

McKnight turned to descend the steps, the crowd fell back to make room for him, and

Dick was just starting to follow, when Sparkler Sal called out:

"No, no, Mr. McKnight, let it pass. As long as I had a shot at him for it, and he knows what it came near costing him, I do not think it will happen again. You must not risk your life for it."

"I'll risk everything," cried McKnight.

"No, no—"

"I tell you I will! Come on, sir, and the best man wins!"

"No, no; I tell you it shall not be," and the woman ran after the mayor and caught his arm. "Let me deal with him myself, and do not risk your life. What would I do without you?" in lower tone.

"Do not interfere with your champion, madam!" requested Deadwood Dick. "I can take care of him, I think. I am willing to risk it, anyhow."

"No! no! I will not allow it! I will not allow any one to risk his life for me—"

"But, he has insulted you, you say!"

"Let him come, madam; do let him come!" from Dick, coolly.

"No! no! I cannot allow it! Do not insist, Jim," fondly. "Accident might be against you."

"And must I stand disgraced a coward?"

"Never, on my account!" put in Dick.

"Let him come, madam, pray, and perform the hero's part. I can't do any more than kill him."

"By heavens! you shall do that, or I'll kill you!" cried McKnight. "Out of my way, Sparkler! I will have his blood, now, or he shall take mine, one or the other. I swear it!"

McKnight made a break to get away, but the Sparkler flung her arms around his neck and detained him.

"I guess we'll have to postpone it, sir," insinuated Deadwood Dick, smiling.

He had unloaded the chambers of the woman's revolver, and he now tossed the weapon on the ground.

"We'll meet!" cried McKnight. "This shall not be forgotten."

"All right, as soon as chance offers. All I ask is fair warning when you are going to open fire."

"I'll give it."

Dick walked away, and when he had gone some distance McKnight succeeded in removing the woman's arms.

"Had I known you would interfere thus," he growled, "and make a show of me, I would have been more slow about jumping to take up your cause. There is no satisfaction in this."

"The satisfaction of having you alive and well," was the low-spoken response.

"Well, I suppose so; but I was willing to take the risk."

"That man is not the one to fool with. I fear him—dreadfully."

"I certainly did not mean to fool with him."

They entered the house, and the crowd melted gradually away.

Later on, when McKnight and "Horse Strader" met, in a place out of the way, the mayor held out his hand.

Dick's hand had dropped to a gun, but he removed it and met the mayor half-way, and they shook hands. It did not look as if the mayor was very bloodthirsty.

"Didn't know whether you meant it or not," assured Dick, "so I was prepared for you."

"I see you were, but that was all bluff. I want to stand right with Sparkler Sal, you see."

"That was it, eh?"

"Yes, that was just it. Nothing more."

"It is plain to see where her affection is centered."

"I guess you are right. She thinks a pile of me; no use trying to disguise that."

"But, can you imagine why she should have lied as she did?"

"About what?"

"She says I insulted her; I did nothing of the kind. I merely refused to apologize. That was all."

"That was it, then. She meant to pop you over for that, I take it, and if she had succeeded, that would have been her plea—that you had insulted her, and the boys would have stood by her."

"Well, that was cute, I must say."

"She is full of tricks, and it will do well for you to look out for her."

"And how are we going to settle the score? Not likely that any one sees us here, but how when we meet in public?"

"That's all right, too; I have promised to give up my intention of killing you at sight, sir."

"Very well. I shall look out for the lady, however."

"It will pay you to do that."

So they parted.

CHAPTER XVI.

A LIVELY HUSTLE.

EARLY in the evening the alarm was sent out that Mongrel Mike had escaped from the calaboose.

No sooner the report, than a crowd ran in the direction of the lock up, headed by the two mayors of the camp, McKnight and Hummingbird.

Others having direct interest were with them—"Horse Strader," Henry Keefer, Sam Claffinger and Hud Taylor, Whit Simpson and Tony Young, and many others.

The report was true.

"I knowed it!" cried the deputy-sheriff. "If he hadn't been guilty he would not 'a' dusted."

"It maybe that he has been taken out and lynched," cried Deadwood Dick. "I want this thing sifted, Mayor McKnight! If he has escaped I'll aid you in taking him, but if hanged, then I want vengeance!"

"Let's investigate the thing," cried McKnight.

The guardsmen were called.

They knew nothing about it; there were the pulled chains—which it appeared it must have taken a horse to draw out of place, and there was the open door. And the guardsmen swore they had been there all the time.

Here was a mystery.

"I tell ye I knowed it!" insisted the deputy-sheriff. "That blood on ther cuss's sleeve wasn't thar fer nothin'."

"He's lit out ter save his skin."

"Or has been taken out for his skin," again hinted Deadwood Dick. "I'll give a hundred dollars to the man who can find him or his body."

A whoop greeted this offer, and many set out at once to make a search.

The guardsmen could tell no more than they had told already, and it was soon found useless to question them further.

Deadwood Dick, McKnight, and Hummingbird returned to the Cosmopolitan Saloon in company.

In the mean time the woman sport had been attending to a matter of business.

She was behind the saloon, talking earnestly to a man, and that man was Dick Becker!

"You know you run a big risk," she was saying.

"I know et, gal."

"And if you are discovered your death is certain."

"You ar' about right, an' that's why I 'sist on a hundred as ther figger."

"Well, if I make it a hundred, what then?"

"I'll git thar, gal, ef I have ter wade through fire an' water, an' swim in gore. That's ther kind o' man I am, an' don't you deny it!"

"And you can keep the secret, you think?"

"I kept one secret, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did that."

"Then I kin keep another, an' don't you doubt et. You fork over ther hundred, an' I'll do ther rest."

"All right. Here is the money, and here is the knife. Mind you, do not use your own knife, for then suspicion might fall on you. Use this, and leave it in the body."

A cool proceeding, assuredly!

"I'll do et, gal, jest as you say. Nuff said. You go back to your business an' leave me to do ther rest."

"All right; I trust you."

They parted, the woman entering the saloon and the man sneaking off in the darkness.

It was later when "Horse Strader" made his way in the direction of the Van Bascomb cottage.

He was apparently not anxious to be seen, as he was taking a rear approach, avoiding the main street, and yet a watcher could not have guessed his intention.

He had come to one of the most lonesome spots on the way from the camp center to the cottage, when a stealthy form appeared behind him, creeping nearer and nearer as slyly as a cat.

Which would have been an interesting fact to an observer.

Presently, after this form, came another, with more speed, yet fully as silently as the first—more so, if possible.

The first crept on, gaining rapidly upon the evidently unsuspecting Deadwood Dick, and at last he gave a leap forward, raising his arm as he did so, and a dull flash revealed a knife.

But, the third follower was also at hand.

As silently as a shadow he had flitted, and as the knife was raised he threw himself upon the would-be assassin.

The latter gave an ejaculation of surprise and fear; the intended victim wheeled suddenly and laid hold upon him, but—

It was needless to make him prisoner now; the knife of the other had done its terrible work.

They allowed the body to drop to the ground.

"Mike, you have saved my life once more!" said Deadwood Dick, extending his hand.

"Which don't begin ter pay ther debt," was the response, as the two grasped hands. "I had my eye on you, s'pectin' mebbly that cuss would do that or somethin' of ther sort."

"And you have done well. But, you must not be caught."

"I won't be, you bet!"

"Where's your disguise?"

"Up the trail where we left 'em, I suppose."

"We'll go up there—but no, not necessary that I should; you go, and come back here to the cottage."

"All right."

They were about to part, when three men pounced out of the darkness upon them, with shouts.

"Hyer he is!" yelled one.

"Hyer's ther 'scaped prisoner, we've got him!"

"Yas, and t'other one, too!" the third.

"He's as bad as ther first!"

"Hold up, you idiots!"

It was Deadwood Dick who ordered, and his revolvers were to the front at once and covering them.

"That's what's ther matter," echoed Mongrel Mike. "Ef you think you have got me, look out, fer ye might be mistaken. That's what Dick Becker thort, but et was me had him!"

"What do you want?" demanded Dick.

"That prisoner."

"And if I give him up to you?"

"We'll take care of him, you bet!"

"I think I understand your meaning. You can't have him."

"We'll have ye both, blast ye! We have found ye both plannin' together, an' we mean ter see ye both swing."

"If you take my advice you will get out of this about your business, and that in a mighty hurry."

"We mean ter have ye, d'ye hear?"

Their voices were loud, and it was plain that they were trying to draw help in that direction.

"I'll give you ten seconds to dust," cried Dick, "and if you don't do it we'll open fire on you, and we'll shoot to hurt, too. you can depend on it."

"Let 'er drive!"

As one man the three sprung forward, straight at Dick, two of them, the other at Mike.

The Mongrel dropped his man on the spot with a bullet between the eyes, but Dick did not fire to kill. His weapons spoke rapidly, and the men dropped their guns.

Each had received a bullet in his arm!

But, the danger was not over, for men were running in that direction, now, and some were near at hand.

The wounded men whooped and yelled in a way calculated to rouse the whole population of the gulch, while Dick and his pard took to their heels and ran up the gulch as fast as they could "hoof it."

When the discovery of the dead and wounded men was made, the excitement became intense, and the feeling bitter.

Mayor Zeke Hummingbird was one of the first on the spot.

"What's this hyer mean?" he demanded.

"Et means that we almost had them two cusses," explained one of the wounded men, between his groans of pain. "They ar' lightin' out up ther gulch, both of 'em, an' they ar' the ones what's done all ther mischief in this hyer camp."

"What did I tell ye?" howled the deputy sheriff, Simpson. "Come on, my boys, an' ef we don't overhaul 'em et will be 'cause we can't, that's all!"

And that was the reason they didn't, too; they couldn't find them.

The two men had disappeared utterly.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DOUBLE HOLD-UP.

HAD any one met "Horse Strader" when he made his way back again into the camp, that one would not have recognized him.

Instead of the rough-clad man he had at first appeared, he now looked the elegant sport, not of the "sharper" kind but one of the respectable sort.

The big slouch hat, the rough jacket and trousers, the blue shirt and rough top-boots with their spurs, and the pistol swung at his hip—all these had given way to something different.

He wore now a neat, dark suit, with "b'iled" shirt and standing collar, and his feet were cased in a pair of fine boots.

He carried a slender cane with a suggestive ball on the end of it.

But, he met no one—one reason was because he made it a point to avoid meeting any one if possible.

His direction was toward the Van Bascomb cottage.

He grew cautious as he drew near, for a double reason. He did not care to be seen, nor did he want to alarm any one who might be in hiding.

That he suspected some one would be in hiding, was certain, for he kept the keenest watch around as he went forward, and his step was so light that it would have taken a quick ear to discover it.

Presently he stopped short; for just ahead, in the shadow of an arbor, he discerned the crouching figure of a man.

That the fellow was watching the house

needed no proving; his position was the proof in itself. But, who was he?

Dick could not determine, for it was out of the question to see his face.

The detective withdrew as silently as he had come.

Presently another shadowy form came forward out of the gloom, and Deadwood Dick made a chirp like that of the cricket.

It was answered in like manner; then the second man came in his direction and joined him. It was "Mongrel Mike,"—he, also, in a different attire.

"What is et?" Mike asked.

"There is a man watching the house," answered Dick.

"You think he's one?"

"He is not the person who made the first attempt, but it is possible that the other has hired him for this effort."

"Then you want to capture him, of course?"

"That is it. We'll creep forward upon him before he is aware of it, and he will be our game."

"I'm with ye, pard!"

With this understanding they moved forward again, Deadwood Dick leading but the other right by his side. Each carried a ready gun in hand.

Like cats they moved to the spot where Dick had first stopped, but the man they were in search of was no longer in his place. That he was gone was certain; but, where had he gone to?

It was hardly to be supposed that he had undertaken his hellish mission, if it was his mission to murder Miss Van Bascomb, thus early in the evening.

They moved yet a little nearer, and a surprise awaited them.

Of a sudden a man leaped out before them, weapons raised, and in a whisper he ordered:

"Up with your hands!"

Even before he could utter the words, however, Dick and his man had put up their hands—with a revolver to the fore!

"It will work both ways," said Dick, likewise in whisper.

"Who are you?" was demanded.

"Are you Henry Keefer?" asked Dick, believing that he recognized the voice.

"Yes, I am he. Who are you?"

"A friend," answered Dick, lowering his gun and thrusting it into his pocket. Mike did the same.

Dick held out his hand, but Keefer was wary.

"I'm willing to greet you friend after I am satisfied that you are such," he said, still holding the drop, which he had now to a certainty.

"You have the proof of it in the fact that we have put up our weapons," argued Dick. "We could have made it interesting for you had we been so inclined. I am Horse Strader and pard."

"The deuce!"

"The fact."

"And what are you doing here?"

"The same as you; we came to guard Miss Van Bascomb."

"Ha! Then it is all right!" lowering his pistol. "That is what I am doing myself."

"We are aware of it, now."

"And do you think another attempt will be made on her life?"

"I am almost certain of it, and that is the reason I and my man are here on the ground."

"You will be lodged in jail if discovered."

"Would you recognize us as the same men?"

"Well, no; that's true; I would not."

"Nor would any one else be likely to recognize us, by night. Have you any suspicion against any one?"

"Yes, I have."

"Whom?"

"Tony Young."

"Hal! That's a new lead!"

"The guess may be a wrong one, but I can't help it."

This was a new lead for Deadwood Dick. He had not once connected that fellow with the deed.

"I think you are wrong, sir," he said. "What reason have you for suspecting him of the crime? That is not the party I have my mind fixed upon, at all, and I think I am right."

"Then whom do you suspect?"

"Sparkler Sal—none other!"

"Great Scott! you can't mean it!"

"Nothing less, I assure you; and I do not believe that I am making any mistake, either. I would not tell you this, only that it is not necessary to keep it a secret longer; and besides, I want you to help me."

"In what way?"

"I am going into the house, and you may come with me. My man will stand here on guard, in case the party should by any chance escape us."

"You are going into the house?"

"Exactly; as we have arranged with Mr. Van Bascomb."

"Then who in the name of wonder are you, anyhow?"

"Well, I am called Deadwood Dick, Jr., to let you into the secret, sir."

"Deadwood Dick! Thank God for your presence here!" cried Keefer, as he grasped Dick's hand. "I have heard of you, and it was my one desire that you could be here to take hold of matters."

"Your desire is realized, then, whether it amounts to anything or not. But, you have not told me why you suspect Tony Young."

"Because he loves Clara Van Bascomb, and knowing how impossible it would be for him to win her against McKnight, the thought fixed itself upon me that he was mad enough to try to rob McKnight, in that way."

"You wrong him, Mr. Keefer, that I know."

"And why do you suspect this Sparkler Sal?"

"Because, in this young lady she sees a rival. She herself is madly in love with McKnight—so much so that she would sell her soul for his sake. We'll see if I'm not right. I'm on the right trail!"

"I begin to believe you must be."

They had talked in whispers, and now made their arrangements in the same low tones.

Dick and Keefer crept to the back door of the cottage, while Mongrel Mike took up a position in the deep shadows near the end of the piazza.

Dick knocked at the door.

It was opened in a moment by Mr. Van Bascomb himself, who gave a start of surprise on seeing a stranger there.

He recognized Keefer, however, at sight, and made no objection as they immediately pressed into the room; then, in the light, he also recognized Deadwood Dick.

"Is it possible!" he exclaimed. "I did not know you."

"The same chap, but in different dress," assured Dick, smiling. "But, is the room ready?"

"It is."

"Then Keefer and I will go up there at once, and we'll be seen no more. You close the house at the usual hour, and have it appear that everybody is asleep. We can take care of the rest."

CHAPTER XVIII.

CAUGHT IN THE ATTEMPT.

DEADWOOD DICK and Henry Keefer repaired to the room in which the attempt at murder had been made. A dim light was burning there, as if the wounded girl was sleeping, and the curtain was nearly drawn,

leaving just space enough so that the light might be seen without.

In the room in which the wounded girl now lay no light could be seen, for the shutters and curtains were all closed.

Dick and his associate made their arrangements, and waited.

Hours passed.

At last came the long-awaited-for signal from without, and both men knew that something was now about to happen.

The signal was one that they could not mistake, and yet at the same time it was such that it was not likely to arouse suspicion in the minds of any others who heard it.

The light burned low.

A form was seen in the bed, covered lightly, and the person of the injured girl in fact could not have look more real.

On a chair in the corner, reclining as if with feet upon another chair, was another form that might have been mistaken for that of the housekeeper, but, like the first, it was a form only!

The two men were out of sight.

At length a very slight noise was heard upon the porch roof; then followed a long period of silence, but, finally, the window gave forth a slight sound.

Little by little, as silently as possible, the window was opened; a hand moved the curtain and a pair of eyes looked in, taking a long and careful survey of the room.

Satisfied, evidently, the hand was removed, and, a moment later, a pair of feet appeared under the curtain, reaching for the floor.

It was plain that the person was a man. At any rate, that the intruder was in male attire.

The feet touched the floor, and gradually the body coming down under the curtain crouched to the floor, where soon the head appeared.

The face was masked.

Looking around for a time, the intruder then rose and took a step toward the corner where the dummy woman reclined on the chairs.

Only two or three steps in that direction, however, when the night emissary turned and went to where the lamp was burning low on a stand.

The light was put out, and, in the almost complete darkness, the intruder then hastened to the bed.

There were other forms in the room, now, moving as silently as the intruder.

Reaching the bed, the night visitant was heard—heard rather than seen, though the motion was visible to the two men so near at hand—to strike three desperate blows at the form on the bed!

The blows were in quick succession, and all had been dealt before the fact was realized that the object on the bed was only a dummy.

There was an ejaculation of surprise, mingled with fear, and the murderer stepped backward.

In the same moments heavy hands fell upon the would-be assassin.

There was a scream in a feminine voice, which revealed the sex of the intruder.

"Caught in the act," remarked Deadwood Dick quietly, his hand on the woman's arm.

"In the name of Heaven spare me!" cried the woman. "Let me plunge this blade into my own heart!"

"Not just yet, thank you. We want you and your confession, madam. The suspicion you have fixed upon others it is now in order for you to dissipate. Crime-stained as you are, I'll see that the innocent no longer suffer for your misdeeds," was Dick Bristol's answer.

"There, I have her now," said Dick to Keefer. "You light the lamp, for already steps are coming this way."

The knife had been wrested from the woman's grasp, and a pair of handcuffs had been clasped on her wrists, so that it was easy for Dick to hold her while Keefer did as directed.

Light was made, and at the same moment the door opened and others hastened into the room.

The prisoner was Sparkler Sal!

Among those to come in were, of course, Mr. Van Bascomb and the housekeeper, who had been keeping a tireless vigil, expecting they hardly knew what, but hoping the murderer might be caught.

"Good heavens!" Mr. Van Bascomb cried. "Sparkler Sal—you?"

Her eyes fell before his stern gaze.

"You," he gasped, "you whom I almost come to—to—Great God, I must be dreaming!"

"It is the grim reality, sir," spoke the great detective; "you can thank good fortune that you have escaped the snares of a pair of the vilest schemers I have ever met—debased, heartless and devilish in their villainy."

"A pair of them, do you say?"

"Yes, McKnight and this creature, and they were planning for—"

"No, no, not McKnight," interrupted the woman, eagerly. "It was all my work; he had no part in it."

"I know best about that," returned Dick. "They were scheming against your life and your fortune, sir, and you have had a narrow escape from their diabolical plot. This woman intended marrying you, if possible."

"Heavens! and it might have been possible. But, there is no question of her guilt, sir?"

"None; we have taken her in the act. Besides, on her other visit to this room she lost a diamond from one of her pins, and I found the stone on the floor. By it I had already traced the crime home to her."

There could be no room for doubt.

Everything was kept as quiet as possible till morning, when Deadwood Dick, Keefer, Mr. Van Bascomb, Dick's man and others left the house and went to the camp center.

The strangers were looked at in surprise; not that they were not recognized, in the daylight, but the change in their appearance was so striking—so remarkable, that it could hardly be believed they were the same men. Then, too, it was seen that something had taken place.

They asked for the mayor.

McKnight was presently found, and on his making his appearance Deadwood Dick promptly placed him under arrest.

The usurping mayor called loudly upon his followers to overcome the opposition and free him, but there was that in the flashing eyes and the commanding voice of Deadwood Dick that deterred them and led them to think twice before they made the attempt.

"Don't try it on," he warned them. "I am Deadwood Dick—if you ever heard of me, and whether you ever did or not makes no difference. I'm a United States Marshal, and I think I'll try my hand at playing mayor here for a little while."

The surprise was complete, and the very name of Deadwood Dick was enough.

McKnight was made prisoner, together with some others of his rascally followers, and the good effect was felt immediately.

Then followed an *expose* that gave the camp something to talk about for weeks afterward, and which showed up the inward rottenness of the ring of which Jimmie McKnight had been the head.

Sparkler Sal was brought forth, and a hearing was given her and the other prisoners, at which Deadwood Dick produced the evidence he had been quietly gathering up, and there could be but one verdict. They

were found guilty, every one, and were held for trial.

Dick showed up the plot by which McKnight had incited the men of the Marguerite to strike, through Sam Claffinger, and how he had handled the strikers to suit his own ends all the way through. Then, the scheme by which McKnight and Sparkler Sal had thought to come into the Van Bascomb fortune, and the inner workings of that scheme as they have been unraveled before the reader, were all made clear.

Sparkler Sal truly loved McKnight, and she could not bear the thought of his marrying another woman, if only for a time and for a purpose. The thought turned her mind, to a degree, and she resolved to kill her rival. She had cause for jealousy, for McKnight loved Clara and intended to discard Sparkler Sal as soon as he had won her for himself. Sparkler Sal had been true to her instinct in that respect, and resolved to put her rival out of the field.

Zeke Hummingbird was restored to his office as rightful Mayor of Hardscrabble, and with the turning of the tide many of those who had been against him hurried to put themselves in favor with him.

The old regime was restored, and the camp was the better for it. There was eventually a wedding there at Hardscrabble, and Clara Van Bascomb became the wife of Henry Keefer. Dick and his pard had remained merely long enough to see the right fully established; then they set out for scenes afresh and pastures new.

THE END.

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